



THE JESSE JAMES STORIES

ORIGINAL NARRATIVES OF THE JAMES BOYS

Issued Weekly. By Subscription \$2.50 per year. Entered as Second Class Matter at New York Post Office by STREET & SMITH, 238 William St., N. Y.

No. 5.

Price, Five Cents.

JESSE JAMES' OATH

OR TRACKED TO DEATH



BY
W.B. LAWSON

WHIPPING OUT A REVOLVER, JESSE JAMES MAKES A BREAK FOR THE WINDOW, SWEEPING A PATH THROUGH THE TERROR-STRICKEN MEXICANS.



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OR,

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By W. B. LAWSON.

CHAPTER I. OVER THE BORDER.

"Throw up your arms!"

These words were uttered in a hoarse voice, full of deep anger.

The scene is in Mexico, just over the Rio Grande, in the fall of '77. Night is closing in upon the town of San Blas, and at the moment when an American gives utterance to the phrase so well known upon the border, darkness is engaged in a death grapple with the last legions of daylight.

Under the shadow of the adobe walls, near where lights are already springing up as the gambling dens open for their regular business, this little scene has come to pass.

The man gives his order like one who has used it often in the past.

He sees the party whom he addresses raise his arms above his head, thus placing himself completely in the speaker's power.

They are not six feet apart, but the man whose hand,

steady as a rock, holds the leveled revolver, takes a step nearer his victim, in order to see that the other plays him no sly game.

Anything goes upon the border.

The man who can draw the quickest has the first shot—in other words, "the longest pole knocks the persimmons."

This man has passed through a terrible experience in the last fifteen years.

His name is associated with bloody deeds.

He is a devil in human guise, yet no one ever dreamed of calling him a coward.

"Now your life is mine—I can take it by the slightest pressure of the finger," he growls, scanning the form before him.

"But you will not!" comes the quiet reply.

"You have followed me from Texas?"

"Yes."

"What do you seek?"

"Your life."

The knight of the revolver starts at the calm reply to his question. The man must be mad to stand there and thus deliberately seal his fate.

"You are a fool to tell me that to my face. Do you know who I am?"

"Jesse James, the border robber, guilty of the worst crimes on the calendar."

This time the other whistles; he cannot but admire the daring that braves him thus.

"You know this, but take your life in your hands by declaring it. I am no outlaw in Mexico—you have followed me here as you say, to murder me. It is money that has done this—the price set on my head."

"You are wrong."

"What then?"

"It is revenge!" the other hisses.

"Revenge—well, what's the difference? You took your life, in your hands when you started upon the trail of Jesse James, and it will end here. Such is a detective's fate."

"I am not a detective!"

The border terror again shows signs of wonder.

Up to this moment he has never doubted but that the party who pursued him across the Rio Grande, into the land of the Montezumas, could be other than some daring detective, whose eyes have been dazzled by the large sums offered for the arrest or death of the notorious James boys.

Before settling in the valley of the Pecos on a ranch, they were concerned in a foray upon a bank in Northfield, Minnesota, where a terrible shooting affair took place, several outlaws being shot down, and the Younger brothers captured.

Since then they have been waiting for some unusually smart detective to trace them to their ranch—the location of which may be betrayed by some false friend.

Jesse James has believed the mysterious party known to be dogging his footsteps to be this long-looked for officer of justice, and decides he might as well settle the business once for all just outside the Mexican town.

"Not a detective? then why in thunder do you follow me to take my life?" he demands.

"I told you."

"Yes, you said revenge. Have I done you any wrong in the past?"

"I have a memory; in it, Jesse James, you are associated with a cowardly crime, the penalty of which is death."

"Yes," returned the other, with a laugh; "death is the penalty, but your death, not mine. I hold the drop, and Jesse James was never known to let an enemy get away to sting him in the heel. Prepare to pass over the dark river."

His manner is cold and heartless; human life has no claims upon this man who has been at war with the law since his boyhood.

"You would not shoot me?" cries the other.

"Why not, fool?"

"Because I am—a woman!"

Shaking the sombrero from its hold, a shower of curls falls upon the shoulders of the party whom Jesse James holds under his revolver.

The sight startles him.

It is unexpected.

His past shows many deeds of violence, even of cruelty toward man, but never once has his hand been raised against a woman.

Scenes witnessed when with Quantrell, the guerrill during war times, have never left his mind—they make him hate and distrust his fellow-man, but respect the gentler sex.

"A woman—after my life!" he ejaculates.

"Why not, Jesse James? You have killed more than one woman's husband, father, or brother. If the prayers of the women you have widowed could be heard above long before now death must have ended your bold career."

"Your sex saves you. I do not war on women. But tell me, what have I done; why do you follow where the bravest detective fears to come? Revenge you say—what?"

"That is my secret."

"Is it fair to hound me to death and not tell me the reason? Perhaps I am innocent."

At this she laughs derisively.

"No danger of that. You are guilty of every crime on the calendar. One could hardly think of a deed you have not committed."

"That is what my enemies say. I know of many guns that could not force me into. The fact that I have restored my revolver to my belt proves that I am not villain enough to shoot a woman."

"You speak truly, and yet I know I am not mistaken. It was your hand that brought ruin and death, though a mask hid your face. I recognized you, and I have followed you over the border to avenge his foul murder."

"What you speak of is a mystery to me. I beg of you, woman, give me the facts. Who are you?"

"Have you not recognized me? But I forget; though my garb ill becomes one used to feminine attire. Come closer, Jesse James, come closer still."

He takes out a match and strikes it upon the adobe wall; as the light flares up he bends eagerly forward and fastens his eyes on that face.

"What! you?"

"You recognize me, then?"

"Jack Dutton's wife!"

"Yes; and you know where Jack Dutton is."

"I swear I do not. What has happened over at your ranch? Is Jack dead?"

"Ay, stabbed through the heart by a masked villain and his words as he fell made me believe it was you who murdered him."

"Tell me—what did he say?"

"Breathed your name."

"And from this you instantly concluded I was the assassin of my friend. I believe he meant that you would seek our aid, that we would right your wrongs."

"That was not all—one of the men called out in an unguarded moment to the leader and mentioned your name. I caught it—Jesse James."

"This is some accursed plot to fasten another deed of darkness on me. Heaven knows I have enough of my own to answer for without others helping me out. My name is Dutton, I swear to you, in my mother's name, I have no hand in the outrage you mention. More than this, Jesse James makes an oath to discover the truth, to avenge the death of his friend Jack."

There is something about the man's manner that goes far toward convincing his would-be murderess that he speaks truly.

"If I could only believe it," she murmurs.

"You can—you must. I will prove it—at the point of the revolver the dastard shall acknowledge his crime. If I fail, there is time enough for you to finish your work here."

"Jesse James, can I believe you?"

"Tell me what has happened—the story?" he demands, in his imperious way, for the man is accustomed to giving orders and being obeyed.

"You shall have it, briefly told. It is just seven days ago this night since you and Frank James left your ranch for a raid in Mexico. On the succeeding night, when all were asleep, we were rudely aroused by fiendish yells. The very heavens were aglow with the light of our burning buildings, and we knew the ranch had been attacked by a gang of outlaws.

"Jack, brave to the last, snatched up his gun, but it was immediately knocked out of his hand.

"He tried to close with the masked man, but I saw and heard a blow, and received poor Jack's dying form in my arms.

"Words fail to describe the scene. Even now I can hear the roaring of the flames, the wild shouts of men as they stamped our cattle, and the shots that sent more than one cowboy to his dreadful doom."

She hides her face in her hands, and shudders as these memories surge up.

In a minute she becomes wonderfully calm again and resumes her recital.

"Then all was over, and I found myself a widow; my murdered Jack lay before me, women were weeping around me, and several of our cowboys stood about sullen and furious.

"One of the women lifted her black hair and showed me that her ears had been cut off.

"Another declared that a man had whispered in his presence that it was the work of Jesse James.

"Do you wonder I declared my purpose to follow you into Mexico and avenge all this?"

"I would have tracked you across a continent to have wiped out that night's work; and now you deny it. Where can I turn for vengeance?"

"Mary Dutton, leave this to me. Jesse James was your husband's friend. He will avenge that foul night's work."

"Oh! if I could but believe it."

"Trust in my word. You speak of one woman having her ears cut off. Did you ever hear of an American doing such a thing?"

"Never before."

"That is proof there were Mexicans in the party. Already I have my suspicions."

"Look! here is the knife by which Jack fell."

"You were keeping it—"

"To end your life with; just as the brave Wallace of old used the sword, crimsoned with the blood of his sweet Marion, to send her cowardly murderer before the bar of heaven."

"Let me have it. I swear to you that the good right arm of Jesse James will bury it in the heart of the man who killed your Jack."

His voice and manner convince her.

She relinquishes the weapon.

"Take it then, and may the chase be short," she breathes, for the time being no longer a weak woman, but filled with the spirit of fire.

"Besides," continued the other, reflectively, "the blade itself may give us some clue; it is customary for men to mark their weapons."

Again he strikes a match and holds it close to the knife with which Jack Dutton was slain.

"Look! do you see that cross—I know it well. The man who did you that foul wrong is no other than the terror of the border—Juan Cortina."

"The woman utters a fierce cry.

"The Firebrand of the Rio Grande?"

"No other. This knife is his. He knows who I am—hence his mask to deceive you. A thousand curses on his head. It is the blackest night's work he will ever do."

Those who ever saw Jesse James fully aroused know what a demon he could be.

Just now, as he grits his teeth, he shows the face of a fiend. It will go hard with the man who next crosses his path.

The slow-burning match dies out.

CHAPTER II.

THE SIGNAL FOR HOSTILITIES.

Presently his mood changed.

He is once more the cool, collected man his enemies have always found him.

"What did you find out, Mary—where were the cattle driven?" he asks.

"One of my cowboys followed; he declared they crossed the Rio Grande into Mexico."

"Just so. The fiend believes himself safe on this side of the river. He little knows Jesse James. I would look for a foe in the heart of New York, and laugh all Pinkerton's men to scorn. It is a trifle to cross a river for a life."

"I am glad you have declared your innocence; it was terrible for me to believe that Jack's friend had brought about his death."

"Return to your home; do what you can to bind up the wounds caused by this raid. Before another moon wanes I swear to bring to you the scalp of the man who killed Jack, if I have to tear it from his head on the streets of Monterey. You believe me, Mary Dutton?"

"You have done many things in the past that may make you shudder to remember, but this act of retribution will wash out more than one. Keep your oath, Jesse James."

"I will; again I swear it."

"Then I will go; not to my ruined ranch, but to watch from a distance how you carry out your word. When least you expect it I may appear."

The disguised woman turns and vanishes in the darkness that swallows her up as though she were not of the flesh, but the spirit.

Jesse James stands for a moment looking after her, as though lost in reflection.

Then, recovering himself, he hastily hides the murderous knife on his person, turns on his heel, and enters the Mexican town.

Presently he is at the tavern or *posada* where the two brothers had put up.

Frank James sits upon the porch in front with a cigar between his teeth, his feet elevated to a level with his head over the railing.

He seems to be interested in what is taking place upon the plaza before the inn.

Two rivals have faced a pair of cocks, and in the light of the many lamps, the game birds are fiercely assailing one another.

There is no crowd around—only a few idlers. An occurrence of this sort is so common in San Blas that it is hardly noticed.

Jesse stands beside the railing, and watches the conflict for a few minutes, until the red cock, by a sudden powerful movement, buries his gaff in the eye of his black rival, thus effectually disposing of him.

The owner hands over the stake, picks up his dead fowl, and the little crowd disperses, to find more amusement, and no one has to go far to discover that when night falls on San Blas.

The Mexican town during the hot, dry day is dull and sleepy, but as soon as darkness comes it awakens to a roaring life.

Music sounds on the ear from mandolin and castanets; rude voices of men are heard; money jingles in the gambling dens as *pesetas*, *pesos*, and *reals* are staked in the games of *monte*.

Yes, San Blas is fully awake now.

The gayest mining camp in Colorado could not show more life than is found here.

As Jesse James swings around the post to take a seat beside his brother, his face is for the instant brought under the broad glare of light from the open door of the tavern.

Frank's eyes see something there.

For years he has fought at the side of his brother; they have been comrades on many a wild foray, and, when danger pressed, stood together facing grim death.

Such a life brings men closer together.

Desperadoes as they are, these men have never yet forgotten that they are brothers.

"What's up?" asked Frank.

"Jack Dutton's dead."

The other whistles his surprise.

"Where did you hear that?"

"From the widow just now; she has been tracking us, believing we did the deed."

"Confusion! What killed him?"

The other took out the fatal knife.

"That is the weapon; examine it, and see if you know its owner, Frank."

One glance as he held the blade in the light, and Frank James utters a curse.

"Juan Cortina!"

"Yes, the Mexican Firebrand."

"Tell me the story."

It is soon done, and the murderer of Jack Dutton has made another enemy.

Thus an hour has passed by.

"Come and let us wander into the den over yonder, and see what's going on. I feel very strange to-night, as though there was wolf blood in me."

Frank feels uneasy at this; he has known his brother to

do terrible things in the past, when this strange man came upon him.

There will be trouble in the Mexican town this night if that wolf blood breaks out.

Soon they enter the gambling den, where the mad taries of fortune endeavor to woo the fickle goddess.

It is no uncommon thing to see Americans in the Mexican towns near the border; sometimes hundreds work in the mines; cowboys drive cattle with the Texan who and even rangers, armed with rifle and revolver, come from the cold North in winter to enjoy the life and gayety of these Southern cities.

San Blas just now is in a festival mood.

Strangers fill her one *fonda*, and numerous *posadas* to overflowing; during the day they indulge in feats of horsemanship and daring; on the morrow a grand bull fight occurs, while each night is given up to gambling on a large scale and dancing at the *fandango*.

In the room which the Americans enter, probably thousands of men are found.

Most of them sit at tables; smoke fills the atmosphere, and loud voices constantly arise.

Desperate games are in progress.

Now and then a dispute arises; excitement grows to fever heat; the lie is given, blows exchanged, and possibly one of the gamblers staggers out into the night air, bleeding from a wound.

It is a shocking scene.

The worst passions of men are aroused here, and despite all this, there is a strange fascination about the spectacle.

Looking upon the scene, by no means new to them, the Americans soon had their attention drawn to a certain table.

Here a young man—a cowboy by his dress—is engaged in a game with a Mexican.

It takes Jesse James only a few minutes to decide that the Texan is being cheated. Behind him stands a man who appears to have little or no interest in the game, and yet whom the Mexican watches from time to time like a lynx.

This third party is making signals—not openly, but by the movement of his hand.

A few words suffice to acquaint Frank of the fact, that the two saunter near.

The cowboy has staked his all. He endeavors to appear nonchalant, but it can be seen that he only represses his excitement with an effort.

The cards are thrown. With a grin the Mexican chuckles, lays down his winning card, and at the same moment it is pinned to the table by the point of a knife.

"You miserable yellow fraud—to sit here, and hear your companion give you points! I'm surprised at you, Yellow Top, for falling into such a game."

The cowboy, turning his head, sees Frank James grasping the ear of the other man, and at the same time holding a revolver to his head.

Taking in the situation, with a whoop he leans over and sweeps the Mexican's winnings into his pocket, feeling that they belong there.

As for the baffled gambler, he rises to his feet, blushing with rage, and reaches for a weapon.

"Drop your hands, fool, or you're a dead man!" comes in deliberate tones.

When he finds himself covered by a revolver, he obeys the order quickly. Somehow, upon the border, a leveled weapon is a great persuader.

For the first time, Jesse James looks keenly at the man he has thus under his thumb.

"Ah, it's you, Gypsy Pedro. Your master, Cortina, cannot be far off, then, since I see his shadow here," for the man he has humbled is known far and wide as the lieutenant of the great border Firebrand.

"Jesse James! *Caramba!* you shall yet feel the weight of his displeasure!" growls the man.

He makes no effort at resistance, even when the other's back is turned, knowing what lightning shots these brothers are.

As for Yellow Top, the cowboy, he shakes the hand that has saved him his last dollar.

"Better get out of this. That man will hunt you down yet, boy," advises the ex-guerilla.

"And what of you? See, he has his head close to half a dozen others"—how his eyes spit fire as they fall on the hated *gringo*. "Take care, Jesse James; I am afraid you'll get into trouble through befriending me."

The other laughs recklessly.

There are times when, rendered furious by the thought that men are constantly hunting him, for money or revenge, so that he can never know what a minute's real peace is, the man grows desperate, and feels like a wild animal at bay.

One of these moods is now on him.

"I would like nothing better. Let the wolves try to snap at me if they dare."

They wait some time, but, though scowling looks were bent upon them, no man dared to pick a quarrel with these desperadoes, whose notoriety had long since crossed the border.

"Come," cries Jesse, finally. "Let's get out of this hole. I hear music over the way. Men are crossing the street, and I reckon the *fandango* is on."

The others follow in his wake; many have already left the gambling den, drifting across to where the sounds of merriment are heard, telling of the *bolero* dance.

Frank James, casting a look over his shoulder, sees the *gitano*, Pedro, beckoning to others in the room.

He feels that something is in the air, but when men live by the revolver, danger does not bring alarm in its train.

They have no trouble in entering the hall where the *fandango* is in progress. It is free to all.

How gayly the music sounds! The pulses quicken under its magic breath.

Even these grim men of war seem to feel the exhilaration of the moment, and look around for partners. It will not be the first time the James boys have danced at a border *fandango*.

As the hour grows later, the fun waxes even more boisterous, but Frank James is wide awake, and he sees men here and there who eye his brother with no friendly look.

They act as though waiting for a signal.

Something is in the wind.

Passing near the other, he says:

"Look out—they mean mischief!"

"I know it," comes the reply.

Some men would have the caution to withdraw from the scene.

Jesse James does not.

He sees they are determined to have a go at him, and knows he will be followed to the door of the *posada*, if necessary.

Since they will have it, better let the affair come off in the dancing-hall.

During a lull in the music, a shrill whistle suddenly thrills the air.

It is understood.

The women scream and fly to the door, through which they are hurried as rapidly as possible.

"Draw!" cries Jesse James, suiting the action to the word, and facing the Mexicans who have gathered in a cluster opposite.

Frank follows his example instantly, and has hardly done so than, like a flash, the lights are extinguished in some mysterious way.

Darkness falls upon the scene, so dense that it can almost be felt.

CHAPTER III.

"GUERRA A CUCHILLO!"

The women have all passed out, and with a slam the door is closed.

Then a silence like unto death falls upon the room. Men seem to hold their breath, as if afraid lest it should betray them.

Knowing in what manner the silence is apt to be broken, the Americans have dropped to the floor as soon as darkness settles around them.

Here they crouch like tigers at bay, with set teeth awaiting the opening of the ball.

It comes.

A loud voice shouts:

"*Muerta los gringos!*"

It is to be "death to the Yankees."

Then bursts out a roar as firearms open. Flames flash up like phantom tongues; the room is no longer wrapped in darkness, for the fire of burning gunpowder illuminates it.

Nor are the Americans idle.

Their time comes as soon as the enemy open fire, and, with the wonderful accuracy that has made their names a terror along the border, the James boys begin to scatter lead among the crowd of greasers opposed to them.

It is a scene that might linger long in the memory of a participant—the spiteful jets of flame spring outward, the rattle of firearms, and the shrieks from those unlucky enough to get in the way of the missiles.

Great events may often be concentrated in a very small space of time.

So it is here.

The battle of the *fandango* only occupies a few minutes, but those are fraught with all the accompaniments of a dreadful carnage.

Bullets fly back and forth, shouts, groans, curses fill the air: the smoke becomes something terrible, blinding the eyes with its very pungency.

No one can see, but the shouts of the terrified Mexicans cause their friends to open the door, and the demoralized and bleeding host pour out, beaten at their own game.

Outside they form in a line, and, with extended weapons, await the coming of the men who have administered such a merited chastisement.

Minutes pass.

The *gringos* do not appear.

One man, more fertile in expedients than his fellows, comes running up with a blazing torch.

Remaining himself in a place of security, he holds the torch in such a way that the interior of the dance hall is visible.

Eager eyes search it from end to end.

Several forms lie upon the floor; bullets have shattered lamps, and riddled the walls, but the three Yankees have disappeared.

Thanks to the quick wits of Frank James, they have found a way of leaving the room of death by means of a window in the rear.

This fact is quickly discovered.

Hoarse shouts announce it.

San Blas is excited. There has always been bad blood between the two nations; for Mexico can never forget what a drubbing the Americans gave her patriotic sons away back in the forties.

Vengeful cries make the night hideous.

The dead call for vengeance.

Gypsy Pedro is not slow to take advantage of this feeling. He has vowed to have the life of the Americans before morning, and he fears now that he will not be able to keep it.

"To the *posada*!" he cries.

The crowd echo the shout.

It is known where the Americans are lodged. The horses must be their first care, for they dare not leave the Mexican town on foot.

Wildly the excited mob takes up its swift rush toward the humble adobe tavern.

Men dart out of houses, catch the enthusiasm without even knowing the cause, and join in.

So the crowd swells.

It numbers more than four score by the time the *posada* is sighted. Weapons are flourished in the air, and the very welkin rings with the fierce imprecations of men.

If the Mexicans could only fight with the same force they use to gesticulate and swear, who could stand up before their onslaught?

Nearer they draw.

What a wild scene San Blas looks upon this gala night. The morrow's bull fight cannot eclipse this tremendous spectacle of nearly a hundred men rushing like hungry wolves upon a devoted tavern, where three others are supposed to have taken refuge.

Will they close the doors and fight to the death?

Already those who lead the mad mob begin to feel a tremor of fear, lest the deadly revolvers of these remarkable marksmen pick them out as the first victims.

While all eyes are fastened upon the small windows of the *posada*, where mine host can be seen looking with alarm on the coming mob, the howling of the dog attracts attention to a point farther down the *calle*.

Three horsemen suddenly ride into view.

They come from the stable connected with the inn; their bearing proclaims them born riders, and the Mexicans recognize the fact that those they seek to slay are escaping.

The Americans wave aloft sombreros as if in defiance; their horses speed down the street at a gallop; a dozen pistols and *escopetas* thunder out a farewell from the greasers.

One of the three riders turns in his saddle. Is he about to fall? Instead, he levels his arm and sends shot after shot at the crowd.

It is amusing to see the greasers scatter like a flock of sheep into the midst of which a wolf has suddenly leaped from the ambush.

Some fall down, others seek refuge behind the corners of houses, while still more dart into convenient openings in the shape of doors.

In a trice, as it were, the *calle* is cleared of all but a couple of wounded wretches, who roll about and groan dismally.

Jesse James rides on.

The wolf blood seems quiet in his veins now.

Better that it should be thus appeased than in some mad foray against innocent men.

Mexico must soon grow too hot for him.

Only a few months previous, with four others, he waylaid a treasure train of mules from the silver mines of Chihuahua, and wrested over fifty thousand dollars in treasure from its rightful owners, taking it into Texas.

They must soon know the name of Jesse James in this section, and, unless he becomes more careful, the desperado will meet his deserts, and leave his body dangling from a tree.

The terrible life led since the war has had its effect upon them both. They can never expect to live like other men; and, rendered desperate by this constant thought, they have done more than one cruel, villainous act that under other circumstances they would have scorned.

Though chased out of San Blas in this manner, Jesse James had no idea of crossing the line into Texas for some time to come.

He had come into Mexico on certain business.

His oath must keep him there for a while.

Juan Cortina, the great scourge of the border, is south of the Rio Grande, and it is to meet this man that the American prolongs his stay in the land that is daily growing hotter for him.

The young cowboy whom Jesse had called Yellow Top, on account of his curly hair being of a leonine hue, is a dashing-looking chap, true as steel, and brave to a fault.

He is not of the same stamp as the James boys, but, for all that, they like him.

A man does not have to be a thief or a rogue to win their admiration.

The kind of human being they detest is the species that fawns and makes out to be servile, all the while plotting how to earn the heavy rewards out for their bodies, dead or alive.

"Which way now?" asks the cowboy, as they thunder over the open prairie.

Frank waits for his brother to speak.

In nearly all their affairs Jesse leads.

"I don't mean to go very far away from the town. If his man is there, like as not Cortina himself will show up soon. These greasers flock to a carnival like bees around a honey tree."

"You intend going back there?" asks Frank.

"That's my idea."

Not a word is said in opposition, for it would be useless. This man always had his own way. He often forced it with his revolver.

"We must make a camp somewhere."

The cowboy here breaks in.

"Perhaps I can help you there. You have been my friend to-night, Jesse James. Come with me, both of you, to the *hacienda* of the old Don Pablo Guzman. I am sure you will be welcome there. I was fortunate enough to do him a service he has not forgotten."

"What was that?"

"Well, the old don has a couple of nieces living with him—Inez, a Mexican, and Molly Taylor, an American girl, whose mother was a sister of Don Pablo's.

"He thinks the world of these girls, and I can't blame him, for they're lovely creatures.

"To make a long story short, I was riding through the chaparral near here one day, when I heard a scream, and, spurring to the spot, found a young girl and a jaguar face to face.

"The animal was about to spring. I sent a rope about its neck in a hurry, and dragged the beast at my horse's heels until it was dead.

"Then I took the girl and carried her to the *hacienda*: not that she was too frightened to walk, but she wanted her uncle to thank me."

"Which one was it?" breaks in Frank.

"Molly Taylor. My arrival, still dragging the dead beast at the end of the lasso, created some little excitement, I can tell you, and Walter Dodd was an honored guest in that house. So you see, friends of mine are very apt to find a warm welcome there."

"Head for the *hacienda*, then, comrade."

"We chance to be keeping that way now. I suppose it's only right for me to tell you the rest of the story, since you know part."

"Not much need of that," grins Frank.

"Of course, you fell in love with Molly, and she with you," laughs the other.

"All very true, gentlemen, but that doesn't cover the case. I was unfortunate enough to inspire a mad passion in the heart of the Mexican beauty, Inez, though never attempting such a thing."

"By the gods!" ejaculates Frank.

"It grows interesting. Beware, Yellow Top; two strings may prove one too many."

"So I think myself. I'm afraid that girl is up to deviltry. She knows the man I was playing cards with to-night. I have seen them out in the garden talking secretly, and believe they were plotting mischief against Molly Taylor."

"Gypsy Pedro?"

"Yes. He is the man. When I sat down with him in that gambling place, it was my intention to beat him down, and when he had lost his last *real*, to stake heavily against his secret."

"I see—quite a little game."

"It was ruined by his cheating me out of my boots. I'm not a card-sharp, though generally I can hold a good hand up. But that is the man, and I believe there's treachery in the air."

"Under those circumstances, I see but one thing to do," declares Jesse.

"Take the girl and run away," cries Frank.

"I've thought of that, but I'm only a cowboy, and I don't hardly know what I'd do with a wife even after I got her."

The others laugh at this.

"I'm trusting you for that, Walter. You forget the neat little ranch you told us about. No sensible girl would refuse that—and you!"

"No joking now, Jesse; but I'm going to ask Molly if she cares enough for me to be the mistress of that little Texan ranch. I've got a rich uncle in New Orleans, and I imagine he will set me up when he sees Molly."

"If he's a bachelor, take care. These rich old fellows are death on the women folks," laughs Jesse.

Thus joking, they ride onward through the dark night—the infallible instinct of the cowboy leading them straight on to their goal.

CHAPTER IV

JESSE JAMES AT THE BULL-FIGHT.

"Here we are!" announces Walter.

Lights have been seen ahead.

The barking of dogs also announces that they are approaching some *hacienda*.

Around them they see signs of cultivation. Buildings loom up on either hand, showing that they are upon a stock farm of some magnitude for Mexico.

The cowboy leads, and presently they dismount before the hospitable doors of the house.

Servants come running to take the horses, and Don Pablo himself appears.

He is a white-haired man, whose age, however, is not much over fifty. Something besides the weight of years has caused his hair to turn from raven blackness to this silvery hue.

The friends of the brave cowboy receive a warm welcome, and feel at home at once.

As the hour is still early, they are pressed to come into the parlor.

Molly is there.

She will entertain them with music. Inez has gone to the town with a maid, to see something of the carnival. Being a Mexican, she cares more for such things than Molly, and can stop at the house of a relative.

Yellow Top gives this one moment's thought, and wonders why he did not see her at the *fandango*; then he is all taken up in Molly.

They pass a pleasant evening.

Before retiring, the three friends smoke a cigar with the don upon the *azotea*, or flat roof. These Mexican houses are all built so that the roof becomes a garden-spot, where one may enjoy the cool breezes, or take a siesta when the sun does not shine too hotly.

Here Jesse broaches the idea of returning to the town on the following day.

He asks Don Pablo if he can rig him out as a native, to which the other laughingly replies in the affirmative, believing it to be a joke.

During carnival week many disguises are worn, and quite a good deal of innocent fun is indulged in by these Southern people.

With the morning comes the work of transforming Jesse James into a Mexican.

It is easily accomplished.

A native saddle and bridle are put on his noble horse, huge spurs upon his own heels, and when these finishing touches have been made the whole thing is done.

"A remarkably dashing-looking Mexican officer," says the cowboy, nodding approvingly.

"What name do you swear by?" asks Frank.

"Captain Roblado."

"Well, good luck to you, *el capitan*."

With a laugh, the American wheels his horse, and is away, heading toward San Blas.

It is the day of the bull-fight, and he will find the little Mexican town crowded.

Among those gathered to take part in the festivities of the day, he hopes to find the man against whom he has sworn an oath—the wretch who murdered Jack Dutton.

Will Cortina be present?

He is known as an outlaw, but has a great following, and is of so much importance in a political way that he comes and goes at will.

These daring rascals are wise enough to make friends of the poorer people.

Thus, when a dark day comes and a hot pursuit is made for them, it is pleasant to feel that to the right and left they have friends ready to help the fugitive escape.

Jesse James rides leisurely toward the town.

So many strangers have flocked thither that he will not attract attention.

Mexican officers are seen here, there, and everywhere, just as though they had no particular station, but were allowed to roam at will.

Reaching the environs of the place, he notices the people already moving in a certain direction.

One group passing him, he asks the course, having mastered the Mexican tongue full well.

Thus he learns that it is to the bull-fight all the good people of San Blas are wending their way on this bright and beautiful morning.

He decides to attend.

There will probably be no better chance during the day for him to discover whether the man he seeks is in San Blas or not; for no Mexican with a heart in his body can remain quiet while a bull-fight is taking place within ten miles of his abode.

A large inclosure has been erected, seats formed, and all the accessories arranged.

True, the whole affair is rudely done, for San Blas cannot put on any style in these things, but it fills the bill just as well as the great amphitheatre in Seville, Spain, where thousands watch the bloody scene.

The American finds one part devoted to the use of horses; he secures his steed, and sits near by, where he can keep an eye on the animal, for there are often miserable thieves present not above stealing a valuable animal,

and the steed that Jesse James rides will attract attention anywhere.

Then he looks around.

Most of those present are strangers, but here and there he sees a familiar face.

Near by is the *gitano* Pedro, stamping up and down trying to get bets on the chances on the first bull, for he is a born gambler.

When he comes opposite the disguised American, he seems to be attracted toward him.

Perhaps he thinks that soldiers must always have money to stake.

It may be some inward motive impels him to a belief that there is enmity between himself and the unknown officer.

At any rate, he endeavors to get a bet from him.

Finding that it will not work, he lets several hints drop that are bordering on insults.

If his game is to draw the soldier into a brawl, it fails. Jesse James sinks all else in the one motive that brings him here—he means to save himself for the man Cortina.

The fun begins; at least, it is fun for the spectators, who roar and clap their hands, and the bull seems to be having a good time at first, chasing his tormentors about, and even tossing one of them over the fence; but he is tired at length, and the final stroke given by the executioner that lays him out upon the trampled grass.

Intense excitement reigns.

Much gambling is carried on, and a halt between the engagements is brought about as a good time to settle accounts.

In vain has the American looked for the man whom he desires to see.

It is evident that Cortina is not present, unless—an idea suggested by his own condition presents itself—he has come disguised.

With this thought in his mind, he again glances around him.

This effort is a failure, too.

The Mexican could so easily conceal his identity that even the keenest of eyes might not discover him.

How, then, is it to be done?

Ah—a new idea!

Gypsy Pedro passes by, still endeavoring to get bets, and the American begins to believe the other either suspects his identity, or else has taken a tremendous dislike toward him, for his words are even more insulting than before.

He quiets the nervous twitching of that right arm, which would fly to the revolver, if allowed its own way, and pretends not to notice what the ruffian is saying.

Under his breath he is lamenting the fact that on the previous night he had not driven his knife through that bronzed hand instead of the card it laid upon the table.

A thought has come again.

He watches the *gitano* eagerly as he moves along the line, talking with this one and that.

It has come into the American's mind that this man is the lieutenant of Cortina, and if the Firebrand of the Border is present, the chances are strongly in favor of Pedro knowing it.

Hence, he eagerly scrutinizes every one with whom the Spanish gypsy holds converse.

Once or twice he thinks he has made a discovery, but on each occasion confesses that is very uncertain.

Finally he gives it up.

As far as he can judge, Cortina has not yet put in an appearance.

The second bull-fight comes off.

As before, old *toro* has a good time at first, but his adversaries are too numerous for him, and the end inevitable—he dies.

This ends that part of the show.

There are other amusements to delight the audience—races with horses, feats of horsemanship, such as picking up coins at full speed, and finally an exhibition of shooting.

Each time the gypsy comes around, he keeps nagging the Mexican officer, toward whom he seems to have taken such a dislike.

The shooting has begun.

A turkey is fastened in such a way that only his head and neck are in sight.

Stationed at a certain distance, the marksman is expected to fire at this constantly moving object, with the hope of decapitating the bird.

As a general rule, the Mexicans are poor shots, although in these days they possess many elegant weapons—made in our country.

Hence the turkey's head remains on its shoulders—if one can use such a term—even though a dozen braggarts try their best to cause a divorce between the parts.

The management makes a stirring appeal.

Is there no one present who can shoot?

He begs some one, for the honor of San Blas, to decapitate that royal bird; or will they have to wring its neck before that assemblage?

To say that the hand of Jesse James itches to have a try, would be putting it mildly.

His wonderful marksmanship has gained him much renown in the past, and saved his life on more than one occasion.

Why not have a little sport?

Cortina is not present, and his other business is of a nature that can keep.

Reckless devil that he is, the man makes up his mind that if Pedro dares him once more, he will accept his offer.

There is danger in it.

Should the fact be publicly proclaimed that the man who broke up the *fandango* on the previous night, and washed the floor with the blood of their friends, is present, this vast assemblage would be like a pack of howling wolves, clamoring for his blood.

Hunted wretch that Jesse James was, he had never been called a coward, and he proves this now by his actions.

Pedro comes.

His glittering black eyes are on his victim, and with a suave smile, he addresses him.

"*El Capitan*, ten golden onzas to one that you cannot accomplish that feat. What say you; will you make a try?"

He does not expect an answer, and, for that matter, believes he has a soft snap, anyway.

"Done!" exclaims the captain.

He rises to his feet.

Taking from his pocket a gold coin, he places it in the hand of the *alcalde* who sits near.

"Hand over your money. This gentleman shall hold the stakes; I can trust him."

With eyes that blaze in wrath, the gypsy gambler is compelled to do as requested.

CHAPTER V.

UNDER THE TAVERN WINDOW.

"Lead me to the line."

This the gambler does willingly.

He means that the game shall not stop there, but that if the other misses, he will taunt him into keeping up the sport.

"The rules?" demands the supposed captain, with a haughty look.

"You can shoot any weapon, so long as it contains but one ball. Here are rifles; take your choice if you have no weapon of your own," returns the master of ceremonies.

For answer the other draws a long revolver.

At sight of this weapon many smile.

One man looks serious.

This is Pedro.

He has roamed through the West, and seen such wonderful exploits done with this American weapon, that he does not hold it in contempt like many of his more ignorant countrymen.

"You give me the privilege of using this?" demands the knight of the revolver.

"Certainly," replies the manager, unable to conceal a grin, "and you may accomplish great results with such a weapon."

"*Quien sabe!* who knows?" murmurs Pedro, who has already begun to suspect that he aroused the wrong customer when he goaded this quiet man to bet on his own prowess.

Somehow, even before the entertainment has begun, he seems to feel those ten golden onzas slipping away from his grasp.

Jesse James looks to his revolver to see that it is in perfect condition.

He may have to use it on different game than a turkey before very long, and it is as much with this idea in view as anything else that he looks so closely at it now.

Then he toes the mark.

Silence has come upon the audience.

They have ceased to laugh, for the figure of the Mexican captain looms up in front, and there is something so determined in his bearing that few men would care to anger him.

The turkey seems imbued with new fear, and darts its head this way and that in a manner so bewildering that it would be the acme of luck for even the keenest of marksmen to sever its head from the body, with only one bullet to place his dependence upon.

No wonder the audience smile.

They imagine Pedro has the game in hand.

It chances, however, that the man who stands there toying with his revolver knows something about turkeys.

He has probably shot more of them in the Missouri bottoms, when hiding from Union soldiers, and, later on, detectives, than most of the people present ever saw.

Their habits are familiar to him.

A dead silence has fallen on the scene.

Jesse James raises the revolver that has in times past taken more than one man's life.

A peculiar sound is heard, it comes from between his teeth, and is something between a whistle and the chicking of a hen.

Instantly the turkey's head becomes rigid.

A sharp report, a puff of smoke, and the supposed Mexican captain walking up to the *alcalde*, holds out his hand for the money.

He has not even deigned to cast a second glance in the direction of the fowl.

Why should he?

With the report of the revolver the turkey's head had left its body, and flown into the air at least a foot.

Every one has seen the feat, and for the moment surprise causes them to be dumb.

Then some one shouts:

"Bravo, *el capitán*!"

The crowd takes it up, and a salvo of cheers rings through the place.

The man for whom these honors are intended pays little heed to them.

He knows full well that were he to announce his true identity, this same crowd would turn and rend him like so many mad wolves.

Although Pedro blusters around as though he would like to dispute that the money was fairly won, on account of the trick whereby the turkey's head remained stationary, he does not dare to openly charge the officer with being a fraud.

A man who can shoot like that is not to be insulted with impunity.

It is now high noon.

The sun blazes on high, and the assemblage begins to disperse.

Not having found his man, Jesse James hardly knows what to do next.

He does not want to return to the *hacienda*, for the idea is still strong upon him that because the *gitano* is here, his master, Cortina, cannot be far away.

Besides, there is another motive that holds him.

The ease with which a silver train was robbed some months before, has made these brothers open their eyes to the fact that in Mexico a broad field is spread to gentlemen of their peculiar tactics on the road.

Treasure lies in vast quantities in the mountains, and, when taken out, is carried in a crude way.

Bold, unscrupulous men may reap a rich reward in this land.

True, if caught, the penalty is instant death by the bullet, but it is about the same in Missouri and Arkansas.

They have heard of a treasure that is to be carried through San Blas on a certain day, and, like all men of their class, covet it.

So, while looking for Cortina, the man from Missouri

is endeavoring at the same time to get on the track of this treasure.

As he rides leisurely along the street, he sees a figure ahead which is easily recognized as that of the gypsy.

Pedro rides a roan of great size, and, with an eye to horseflesh, Jesse James sees in it an animal of endurance and bottom, though he would not change his own steed for any other he had ever set eyes on.

Seeing him enter a tavern of the lowest class, and let a servant take his horse, the American forms a plan of action.

Near by he finds a place to keep his horse. An honest shoemaker has a shed, where the animal can be cared for, and yet remain saddled and bridled for immediate use.

The man has not forgotten the incidents of the preceding night, and remembers how valuable a second is at times when pursuers are on one's heels.

This done, he saunters to the *posada*, and takes up his quarters there.

Finding it possible to keep out of Pedro's sight, he determines to do so.

He has a room above.

Its little window looks out upon the street.

While concealed himself by the vines, he can look out and see what is passing.

The cobbler's little shop is also in view, and it gives him satisfaction to know that just back of that his faithful steed is standing, ready for the road in case of necessity.

Murmured voices reach his ear.

He looks down through the vines, and his eyes shine with the rare good luck that has fallen to him.

There is a bench in the shed.

A man reclines upon it.

Within reach is a table. A bottle and glasses can be seen upon the board.

Evidently the man is bent on taking life easy. That is nothing new, for these Mexicans do very little work as a rule.

The American is interested in the fact that this party is Pedro.

It looks as though fate were working to please him in his duty as a Nemesis.

He bends his ear and listens.

Another man stands near Pedro, and seems to have brought him a message.

He chuckles over it.

"*Por Dios!* Sanchez, all goes well. We will pluck this flower when it comes. Meanwhile, I shall await the turn of events here."

"Has the *senor* any message in return?"

"I will write it. He will find me here. Did you say sixty thousand onzas, Sanchez?"

"*Si, senor*, so I was told."

"A glorious treasure—it shall be ours!"

The unseen listener makes a wry face.

He realizes that this gang of Cortina is after the same treasure that he and Frank seek.

Jesse James still listens.

He forgets that he has had no dinner.

No sooner has this man departed than a second one seeks an audience with Pedro.

"Oh! Carlo, my good man, you are back?" draws the fellow on the bench, puffing a cigar.

"Si, senor."

"You followed those men by their trail?"

"Si, senor."

"To the Rio Grande?"

"No, excellency."

"Why not?"

"They did not go there."

Pedro evinces more interest in the chase.

His eyes flash fire, and the party above can see how he grinds his teeth.

"Where, then, did they go? You do not mean to tell me they returned here."

"They went to the *hacienda* of Don Pablo de Guzman. The cowboy saved his niece from a jaguar in the woods, and he with his friends are honored guests at the house."

At this Pedro sits up.

He is no longer sleepy.

"What you tell me is royal news, Carlo. You shall be well paid for it. They have not gone beyond our reach. I shall yet have my revenge."

How he rolls that ward over his tongue.

It is as though he finds meat and drink in it.

To a Spaniard who believes himself injured, revenge is sweeter than the nectar of the gods.

They seldom forgive, and take offense easily.

Carlo, at a motion from the other, lifts the bottle, and, disdaining the use of a glass, allows a goodly portion of its contents to gurgle down his copper-lined throat, after which he heaves a tremendous sigh—whether of satisfaction at the amount imbibed, or despair at having to stop short—remains an open question, not to be decided.

"And they are there yet, Carlo?" pursued the other, rolling a cigarette with dexterous fingers.

"Two are, senor."

"Ah! which two?"

"The cowboy and the one called Frank."

"But the other—man alive, he is the one I hate! *Carajo!* Where has he gone?"

"He rode away this morning."

"Where to? Malediction on you, if he has after all escaped over the river!"

"Senor, he went not that way."

"Tell me, which route did he take?"

"The trail to San Blas."

At this Pedro laughs.

"Ah! he comes back into the lion's mouth. The lion will close it. But, Carlo, that was this morning. Has he been in San Blas these hours, and none of my men reported him? Strange!"

Carlo evidently does not think so.

"Listen. I talked with your brother—he who is the don's *major domo*. He told me a strange thing—that three Americans came last night; this morning two remain, and one Mexican captain galloped off toward San Blas."

A bomb explodes.

At any rate, the gypsy leaps erect, with a cry of mingled wonder and rage.

"A captain, you tell me, Carlo, and riding in this direction? Yes, he was at the bull-fight. *Malediction*, what a

fool I was! But wait. If he is here still, I will find him—I will crush the snake!"

While hissing these hot words, the Mexican does not dream that the man he curses is within five feet of him as he stands there, hidden by the vines.

CHAPTER VI.

THE RIVAL DESPERADOES.

Upon hearing these boastful words of the gypsy, Jesse James is strongly tempted to brush aside the vines and cover him with his revolver, but wiser counsel prevails within his breast, and he refrains.

Already he has learned much that is of value to him by listening, and it will spoil all to disclose his presence.

So he grits his teeth hard, and listens.

But Pedro has heard news. He no longer cares to lounge there in the shade.

"Who has seen the Mexican captain? Which way did he go? Five reals to the man who can find where he is at present staying."

The man in the window hears this, and smiles as he thinks what great detectives these Mexicans would make up his way.

He has been wise.

To take time by the forelock has always been a settled principle with this desperate man.

On the way from the scene of the bull-fight to the town, he has managed to dispose of certain portions of his garb that stamped him a captain.

Thus, when he sought refuge at the tavern he was but a soldier; and there are plenty of this sort in San Blas, as a barrack may be found at one end of the town. The troops that guard the border have a sort of rendezvous here, though, truth to tell, their time is better taken up making love to all the pretty girls than in searching for filibusters or outlaws.

Hence, he is safe.

Pedro will not discover him, hunt he ever so closely through the town.

The only chance he can see of his whereabouts being made known is in the accidental discovery of his noble horse under the shed in the yard adjoining the cobbler's.

His master can see the animal's head from his window—it may even be seen from the street below if attention is drawn thither.

While Pedro is giving fierce orders to his man, telling him to have every public house in the town searched, and describing the noble horse minutely—showing that he had admired the pretended captain's mount—he is looking straight across to where that self-same steed is busily engaged munching hay.

Fortunately for the plans of Jesse James, the gypsy does not suspect this fact.

When they are gone he makes a few more changes in his looks, at which he is something of an adept.

Then he descends and has dinner.

Through the afternoon he lounges about.

Once he sees Pedro and another man enter the low stable belonging to the tavern.

He knows what they seek, and smiles at the forethought which has defeated them.

The day drags on, and once more night comes.

After his evening meal, the American saunters out, and his first care is his horse, since upon that animal all depends in case he has to make a rapid flight from the town.

Again San Blas wakes up from a *siesta*.

Lights sparkle like glow-worms; the streets are no longer dark, since each building is so arranged as to share its inward illumination with the public.

Crowds gather and press in to the national vice.

Gambling is a mania in Mexico.

There are no real laws restraining it, and tricky gamblers flourish everywhere, exhibiting their devices openly on the street.

The American knows where to look for his man, and sure enough the *gitano* Pedro is found just where he appeared on the preceding night, trying to find some game.

By keeping track of him, Jesse James expects to discover Cortina when he arrives.

He loiters about the gambling den two hours.

During that time he has seen the adroit Pedro clean out three gulls by his trickery.

The last one of the trio seems to have an idea that he has been humbugged, though perhaps unconscious of the methods employed.

Filled with anger, the unhappy wretch leans forward and hisses.

"*Caramba!* you are a cheat, *senor!*"

Hardly had his lips framed these words than the arm of Pedro flashes forward; there is a scream, and the poor devil who has thus incurred the hostility of Cortina's lieutenant falls back, badly wounded.

He is hurried from the place by some of his friends, who know the devil Pedro better, and consider his victim lucky to escape with his life.

Finally no one will play against the man who handles his knife so easily; they do not care to run up against a *machete* after trickery has cleaned out their pockets.

Pedro keeps a watch on the door.

So does the American.

He understands some one is expected, and can guess that person's identity.

Believing thus, he is not surprised when his eyes fall upon Cortina himself, standing in the doorway, looking upon the scene.

How the eyes of the American glitter.

The assassin at sight of his prey must feel the same awful sensations; so does the jaguar as, crouching on a limb, he prepares to launch himself upon the hideous alligator below, his old-time enemy, hated and feared.

These two men are alike in many respects; crafty, bold, unscrupulous, and, at times, merciless in dealing with others.

Self has always been their motto. When it is expedient to make friends they stop at nothing to do so; but as soon as those friends are needed no longer, the first occasion that arises may seal their death warrant.

Then again, both are outlaws, though in this respect the title is more appropriate in the American's case, for has has been virtually hunted out of the country he calls home.

They have met before.

Cortina hates the James boys because they have in-

vaded his stamping ground. He does not forget how cleverly they captured the silver train; nor has the Government forgotten how brutally men were murdered in this affair.

It pleases the American to think that he is once more offered a chance to take the quarry from between the paws of the Mexican tiger.

He is even debating the question whether it might not be good policy to let Cortina live to learn that he has again been beaten by the enemy and rival he hates, and then accomplishing his destruction in good season.

The man advances.

He is well known in San Blas.

Had the town garrison so desired, they could have put a hand on the great robber of the Rio Grande at almost any time, but that worthy wielded too great a political influence, and the soldiers had orders to let him alone.

Though accounted an outlaw, Cortina is shrewd enough to confine his operations almost wholly to the other side of the line.

A raid is made through some valley where the herds of the stockmen graze in peace, some hundreds, perhaps thousands of cattle stampeded, a few herdsmen or cowboys murdered, and the terror of the border is on the other side of the Rio Grande, secure in his mountain retreat.

The daring assault of the Americans upon the silver train has aroused Cortina.

He opens his eyes to the fact that a new and profitable field is open to him.

These treasure trains are coming at long periods; there is one on the way now, and it is with the idea of securing this that the Mexican outlaw comes to San Blas.

It is not the festival that draws him.

He believes in business every time.

If he attends a *fandango*, it is with some scheme in view for profit.

As he advances now, nods greet him on all sides, which are cheerily answered.

Cortina is proud.

It pleases him to see the homage men pay to a scoundrel of his stamp.

If he were a general in the army, he would not excite half the interest he does now.

He has sighted the *gitano*.

Pedro has at length found another dupe, and is deeply engaged cleaning his pocket of the last *peseta*, when some one slaps him on the back.

"*Vaya hombre!*" says a voice.

The man looks up.

"Cortina!" he exclaims.

The small game is forgotten, it is overpowered in the shadow of the greater.

Jumping to his feet, he wrings the hand of his master in an effusive way.

"What news?" asks the outlaw.

"Much of interest," comes the reply.

"Then let us find a corner where we may have a nice little talk, without a dozen impertinent dogs picking up the crumbs. Lead off, Pedro."

The gypsy glances around.

As the room is pretty well crowded, it seems like a

task to find a place where they will not have neighbors too close for comfort.

To go outside in the darkness is a bad idea, for no one can tell whether an eavesdropper be near or not—they must remain here.

Ah! his eyes light on an unoccupied corner.

Here they may converse.

Better still, a couple of chairs stand on either side of a small table.

"Come thither, colonel," he cries, leading off.

The American calculates truly when he sees the corner they aim for.

His idea is to find a means of overhearing what may pass between these worthies.

Can it be done?

He has sharp eyes, and they instantly note a certain fact that may be of benefit to him.

The corner to which the men are retiring is separate from the gamblers in the room, and the scowl of Cortina will prevent any man intruding his presence closer than is necessary.

In the partition Jesse James notices an opening—it has been used in the past, when the room was an eating-place, to hand dishes through, much after the style of a third-class restaurant in Chicago or New York.

He jumps at the idea.

If he can only find a means of getting beyond that light dividing wall, fortune must favor his plans, and give him a chance to overhear what these two men converse about.

There must be an entrance.

Eagerly his eye runs along the whole length of the partition, in search of the opening.

He is nearing the extreme end, and becoming disappointed at his non-success, when, with a thrill of satisfaction, he discovers the door.

In another moment he is heading for it.

Men are too much interested in their own games to notice any movement of his.

It is an object of the American to reach the door before the two comrades become seated, for should he pass through afterward, suspicions might be aroused—it does not take much to start them.

In this fortune favors him.

His way to the door is clear, while they have to pick a passage among the most earnest of gamblers, and Cortina moves slowly, nodding to this one, and speaking to another.

As the American draws open the door and passes through, he sees Cortina and Gypsy Pedro just about to take their seats at the table in the corner.

CHAPTER VII.

A CLOSE CALL.

After passing through the door, the American finds himself in what at first appears to be utter darkness, for he has just come from a glare of light.

In a minute or two his eyes will become accustomed to the situation, and he will then discover that enough light permeates through various crevices to take away the full force of the gloom.

Besides, he knows in which direction the opening lies;

even if he did not, he could soon discover it, for quite a flood of light creeps through at that particular spot.

So he crawls along in that quarter, eager to catch the sound of their voices.

He is within five feet of the opening, and chuckling at the prospect of soon realizing his most extravagant expectations, when suddenly a hand is thrust through the opening, and the stick holding the shutter up torn away.

As a consequence, no sooner is the hand withdrawn than the piece of board drops.

Jesse James' heart drops with it.

Is he to be foiled thus when so near the game?

Another change comes over the spirit of his dream; he notices that, although the shutter has fallen, it has rebounded an inch or two.

Thus it serves in lieu of a sounding board.

Crouching below it, one can hear what is going on in the large gambling room better than if the situation had remained as before.

He quietly ensconces himself there to listen.

The general noise somewhat destroys his power to catch all that is said, but the two men talk loud enough for him to hear much that is of great interest to him.

Pedro narrates his adventure of the previous night, and Cortina expresses astonishment at the daring of the Americans in thus braving a whole town.

At the same time he curses them roundly for daring to enter upon his ground, and delights to know they have made enemies of the citizens.

Perhaps they will yet find Northern Mexico too hot for comfort, between the fury of the people, the watchful soldiers, and the jealous outlaws.

He questions further.

Pedro reluctantly narrates the incident of the bull-fight, and his master is astonished at the audacity of the Americans, while at the same time he cannot but admire his daring, and does so in words that cause a smile to appear upon the grim face of the man hiding so near.

Then Cortina speaks his plans.

He gives full particulars regarding the movements of the expected pack-train bearing the treasure from the silver mines.

It is evident that he has had a good opportunity to learn all these things; his spies are everywhere, and eager to serve him.

The man on the other side of the partition hears it all, and chuckles from time to time.

He realizes how nicely the game is being played into his hands, and what a great scheme it will be to let Cortina do the work, secure the treasure, and then lose it again.

One thing about the other's plans makes him grit his teeth in a sudden spasm of rage.

Cortina has hit upon a brilliant idea; he does not want the Mexican Government to know that he has come down to robbing the trains, and murdering the soldiers that guard them.

Hence, himself and a number of his followers will, for the occasion, play the American.

They have done it before, and recently, too, when they cleaned out the Dutton ranch, and made Jack's widow believe it was the work of Jesse James and his friends—for although the two brothers had at first been known as

the Howards, their identity has gradually crept out, until almost every one is acquainted with the fact that the Howard ranch is run by the notorious Missouri outlaws, the James boys.

Some of the train's defenders will prove cowards, and escape the slaughter by surrendering.

These men can be easily made to firmly believe that the leaders of the masked gang are Jesse James and his brother.

Thus the blame will never fall upon the head of Cortina. It is a new idea, this shifting the responsibility of awful deeds to the shoulders of a man he hates, and the Mexican glories in the brilliant prospect, never dreaming that the party most interested is even then within arm's length of where he sits, drinking it all in.

Having heard all he wants, the American thinks of retiring.

The two men have left the table, and are among the gamblers, talking earnestly.

Jesse James awaits his chance, and then once more makes use of the door.

The last half-hour has been fraught with great luck to him, and he cannot regret having come to the gaming hall after information.

He is in no hurry.

Later on he realizes that it would have been much better for a man answering his description if he had thought it best to make for the *hacienda* after securing what he sought.

While lounging about, and just ready to quit the gilded den of vice, the American's attention is attracted to a man hurriedly entering.

He seemed excited.

Evidently he carries news for some one.

Eagerly his eyes rove around the room, until they settle upon a certain individual.

It is the *gitano*.

Straight up to Pedro he pushes his way.

The latter shows by his manner that he anticipates news of some kind.

Why not?

The man has the expression of one who has much to tell, and Pedro involuntarily glances toward his master, as though he would have him hear what is said.

Jesse James stands near by.

He has a curiosity to know what is up.

Already he has learned that these fellows are acquainted with the fact of his temporary residence in the *hacienda* of the don.

That the coming of the man has some connection with them he feels in his bones.

The fellow, breathing hard, speaks as rapidly as his exhausted state will permit.

Pedro catches the enthusiasm.

His eyes roll, he clutches the man's arm as he hurriedly questions him, and then he seems to sweep the whole room with his glance.

What does it mean?

Important news alone can thus excite the man.

Jesse James has a sudden idea that it may be well for him to quit this place.

He scents acute danger in the air.

Before he can take action, however, the gypsy has already made a move.

He leaps upon a table.

The gamblers start back in amazement to see their silver rolling right and left, and then make a frantic effort to recover the money.

As usual, a noisy buzz rings through the place—the murmur of conversation, the clink of money, the shuffling of feet on the floor, or loud laughter—in all a conglomeration that can only be designated as the hum of a hive of bees.

Pedro commands quiet.

He does so with authority.

Stamping his foot upon the table he calls out with the roar of a lion:

"*Silenzio!*"

Every one hears.

Every one obeys.

They know not the meaning of this order, but recognize the authority from whence it comes.

Gypsy Pedro is the lieutenant of a great man, and Cortina himself is present; hence it is probable that the *gitano* desires to promulgate some expressed wish of the notorious *contrabandista*.

Silence comes.

One could hear a tack drop, so quiet it is.

Jesse James moves a little nearer to a window; he believes that in times of peace it is best to prepare for war, and hence bothers himself with wondering where that window opens.

"Fellow-citizens of San Blas," cries the new-comer, "most of you were present last night when the accursed *gringos* broke up the *fandango*. Four of our friends were buried this morning; three still lay groaning with their wounds, all coming from these devils.

"Not content with this, one of them returned to-day; he was at the bullfight in the disguise of a Mexican captain."

Many exclamations arise.

The Mexicans have not forgotten the unknown officer who shot the turkey's head off.

"Yes, the man who used his revolver was no other than Jesse James, the outlaw. He is in the town still—more than that, I have just received information that leads me to believe the man is in this room at this very second."

A great commotion ensues.

Each man looks into his neighbor's face as though suspicions are immediately aroused.

"Listen again, comrades; this man is here in the dress of a soldier."

The cat is out of the bag.

Jesse James has again been cornered, and can only escape through rare good luck and a brilliant use of those powers that have never yet failed him.

"Guard the door!"

It is Cortina who bellows this out.

The outlaw knows his identity is no longer hidden; if he hesitates even a dozen seconds it may be to receive a bullet through the brain.

Whipping out a revolver, and holding it in his hand he makes a break for the window.

Men are in his way.

That is a bad thing for them.

One goes over with a broken jaw, the revolver having come in contact with it; a second meets the American's

fist, and thinks the floor must have jumped from its place; while a third receives a bullet that doubles him up like a hinge.

Thus the desperado sweeps a path.

They drop out of his way like dry leaves before the roaring cyclone. One or two shoot at him, but aim high, for fear of striking their friends.

A knife is thrust out; the man is wounded, but that does not amount to anything.

So the merry war goes on.

Only for a few seconds, though much is concentrated within that space of time.

Then he finds the window close by.

Turning, he looks for Pedro, to present his last compliments, but that worthy wisely dodges behind another man, thus saving his life.

Then, without a moment's hesitation, the desperate American raises his foot, shivers the whole sash, glass, frame, and all, and while the broken pieces are still jingling on the ground, coolly plunges through the opening thus made.

CHAPTER VIII.

GOOD-BY!

The window is close to the ground, which proves fortunate for the man who jumps, for his foot has caught on the sill of the opening, and he sprawls upon hands and knees.

Pieces of the broken glass cut him in a dozen places, but none so serious as to disable him.

Scrambling to his feet, he carries away lots of "jewelry," as he terms the glass that clings to him wherever it stuck.

The utmost confusion ensues within the room he has so hastily quitted.

Soon men begin to pour out.

By this time, however, the American has gained something of a good start.

He does not run so fast as might be expected, for the glass is painful, and he knows the blood is dripping into his boots.

A hunted man is always much the same as a hunted animal—desperate, excited, panting with the heat of the chase.

His pursuers see him.

With wild shouts they follow.

To look at the chase, and hear the clamor raised by those who come after, one would think the fugitive's chances slim indeed.

Truth to tell, however, the Mexicans are not all as anxious to come up with him as their wonderfully fierce cries would indicate.

They know him of old.

The knight of the revolver, in the short time he has been among them, has already made himself a name to frighten children with.

Some bolder spirits there are.

These, led by Pedro and Cortina, keep up the chase, with the intention of overcoming the lead possessed by the fugitive.

It is of short duration.

The cobbler's shop is near by, but Jesse James dares not enter now.

Before he could mount his horse and throw open the gate, the whole howling mob would be in front; to ride among them would be to court death, as a dozen weapons must be aimed at the man on horseback, towering above them.

He is too wise for that.

Passing on he keeps his eyes open.

The door of a house is open.

Without ceremony he darts in and closes it.

Then he gropes his way along, tumbles at the foot of the stairs, and mounts them.

It is not his purpose to hide.

All he wants is to keep the enemy at bay for a time, until he can escape.

He strikes a match.

This shows him what he seeks—the narrow stair so common in all Mexican houses, that leads up to the *asotea* above.

Instantly the ex-guerrilla mounts.

He forgets that he is wounded in a dozen places, and losing blood constantly, so that his boots are even now wet inside.

Upon the door of the house thunders a blow. It is direct evidence of two things—the mob knows that he entered this stuccoed building, and its advance runners have reached the spot.

The sound causes him to listen.

Reaching the roof he lowers the trap.

Is there no way to fasten it?

Perhaps it would be as well not to do this, as it must immediately assure his pursuers of the route he has taken, when they come to find the trap held down from above.

He hurries over to the front.

It is a low, two-story house. Seldom is one seen in Mexico higher than this, for the presence of the volcanoes in the interior proclaim that this has been a country where earthquakes were not infrequent, and the people from ages back have dreaded lest their dwelling come rattling down about their heads.

As he bends down and looks over, the sight that greets his eyes is far from reassuring.

The narrow street is filled by a crowd.

Constant accessions are made to it.

Men bearing torches have darted out of other houses; the street is no longer in darkness.

Jesse James looks upon the sight; it thrills the man of blood to think that all this furor and excitement is on his account.

Then he remembers that he must escape.

Some one of those many eyes may be turned upward, and behold him peering over the parapet.

Seconds are too precious to be wasted; already he hears crushing blows being delivered upon the door that must soon break in the weak bar he found and placed in position ere groping for the stairs leading to the region above.

Stopping only long enough to draw a vicious-looking splinter of glass from his hand, he makes for the back end of the flat roof.

There may be some way by means of which he can descend in safety.

Water pipes are hardly to be looked for upon a building of this sort in Mexico.

A friendly tree will answer.

In vain he looks for a limb overhanging the house; the trees are further off.

Can he jump?

The distance is not so terrible, and in the daytime a man of his daring would not hesitate a minute about attempting this, but all is dark below; he cannot see what may be there, and nothing is more terrifying than a leap into unknown space.

It is not this alone that holds him.

He knows that should he make the leap and have his leg broken, he is a doomed man.

Only as a last resort, then, will he make this mad jump into black space.

He looks further.

What is that object? He believes it to be the limb of a tree, only a few feet away. Can he spring upon it, and hold fast?

There is no time for debating the question.

Action must be speedy.

He resolves to trust to his eyesight. If it has deceived him, he must go down.

Climbing over the parapet, he finds a lodgment for his feet upon a ledge below.

At this moment a tremendous crash announces that the door has given way.

His hated pursuers are in the house.

Stretching out his hand, he endeavors to reach the supposed limb, but fails.

However, he has become more than ever convinced that there is no fallacy about it.

Holding his breath, and preparing for a shock, he throws himself forward.

He must speedily know whether it is a phantom limb or not; his extended arms close about it, the support yields, he is lowered several feet, but does not give way.

His feet touch a stouter limb below, one he can fully put his trust in, so he suddenly releases his hold above, and drops quickly, in order to prevent himself from falling.

All is well.

His daring venture has proved a success.

To reach the ground is the work of a minute.

As he gains terra firma he realizes that his enemies are upon the roof.

They cannot see him; that is one comfort.

A few minutes before he was furious at the darkness because it kept him from discovering the position of the friendly limb; now he blesses it, for the reason that he himself is concealed from his foes.

To make his way out of this garden is the next thing that engages his attention.

He gropes along, hoping to strike the wall.

Plants of tropical luxuriance surround him, and impede his progress.

He pushes on, trying to keep in a straight line, but failing lamentably.

About the house the mob rages.

Such is their fury, that they threaten to tear the adobe structure down unless some satisfaction is given for the mysterious disappearance of the hated American seen to enter here.

He does not believe in hiding his light under a bushel, and accordingly vents it.

"The garden! Search the garden!"

Jesse James hears the shout.

He has not yet found the wall. Who would have believed such an unpretentious building would have such a great garden?

They will soon be after him now, like wolves in the chase; he can stand at bay, if the worst comes, and with the thought he grasps his revolvers more tightly in his bleeding hand.

What is this?

Two wolfish eyes glare at him in front, and a deep growl sounds; it is enough to send a cold shudder through the bravest heart, and even this bold desperado recoils.

Then it flashes upon him that this is a dog of some sort, no doubt used to guard the garden against trespassers in the night.

He does not hesitate an instant.

It is life or death.

Besides, since discovery must shortly come, what difference does it make?

The weapon that has hung in his cut hand since reaching the base of the tree is brought to a level; he cannot take aim, but to a master of the weapon this is not needed.

A sudden report, one savage yelp, and the glaring eyes no longer fascinate him; his path is not blocked by the dog demon.

Without further delay he presses on.

His enemies are no dolts; they have heard the shot, and know what it means.

He must soon have them hot after him.

Fortune thus far has favored the fugitive; it may continue to do so.

One cannot help feeling some interest in his desperate effort to escape.

True, he is an outlaw, a man unscrupulous as to the means he employs to gain his end, more than once a murderer, since he has shot down men in cold blood; but those who hunt him are little better in their way, and the general sympathy is with the minority.

All at once he bangs up against some obstacle to his progress, and realizes that it is the wall at last which he has found.

To climb it causes him a little trouble, for his cuts hurt, but he is still strong and agile.

To his surprise, when he lands on the other side he finds himself in the small inclosure of the cobbler—there is the shed on one side.

His heart almost comes into his throat.

Have they found his horse?

The fact that his presence in the gaming den was known causes him to fear lest this may have become known also.

Never in all his life has the man known the fear that comes upon him now.

Beset by savage foes on every hand, wounded and sorely pressed, if he is deprived of his horse the game is certainly up.

Ah! a whinny.

It brings him good news; he knows the faithful steed is still under the shed.

Eagerly he rushes forward.

Another moment and his arms are around the neck of his steed; he is human enough to love the animal in spite of his crimes.

To unfasten the horse and jump into the saddle is but the work of a minute.

He hears loud cries along the wall; the enemy have reached that line.

Their cries seem to arouse others to a sense of their duty; men spring up as he opens the gate; the presence of the horse was known and these men have been left here to watch for him.

There is an exchange of shots, a lively rattle which is speedily over.

Several of the guards have been laid out, for the revolver of Jesse James seldom speaks without terrible results.

As for that unconquered desperado, he is galloping down the street holding his revolver in one hand, cowboy fashion, and his sombrero in the other, shouting his defiance, and sending several shots in the air to let his greaser foes know he is still very much alive.

CHAPTER IX.

JESSE'S RETURN.

He heads for the hacienda, where his brother and Yellow Top are taking life easy.

The stars guide him.

It is not the first time Jesse James has to trust himself to such a compass; to men who lead the wild life that has been his lot, such a thing as getting lost is seldom known, for there are a dozen ways of finding the points of the range to the person well up in woodcraft.

He rides on fiercely.

The dangers through which he has just passed do not bear heavily upon him.

In his adventurous life he has seen too many such to allow them to bother him.

His thoughts are of the future.

Now and then a chuckle breaks from him as he remembers how handily he overheard the conversation between Cortina and his lieutenant.

Their secret is his.

It will be strange indeed if he cannot find some means of baffling them.

The treasure train shall fall into the hands of the Mexicans, and then descend to him.

Taken altogether, the man has much to amuse and interest him as he dashes along the lonely prairie trail, northwest.

The darkness hangs about him, but he has made no mistake in his bearings.

It is nearly midnight.

Just beyond, the crowing of a cock tells him he is near the estate of the Mexican don, and that it would be well to slacken his pace.

The don has his place surrounded by a high hedge, and the entrance is guarded at night, for there is always danger from robbers in this border country, where the outcasts of so many nations are gathered to have a gay time.

Soon he strikes the hedge.

The way this is planted guides him to the entrance, and a sturdy hail soon brings Tomaso out to give him the liberty of entering.

To the man at the gate he surrenders his horse and a silver real, with instructions to have the animal faithfully attended to.

The American knows where the room lies to which he and his brother have been assigned.

It is on the ground floor.

A bay window serves as a door, by means of which the outer air can be reached.

The glass window-door is open.

As the night is rather warm, it has probably been left thus by the sleepers within, in order that they may obtain fresh air.

He enters thus, without disturbing the household, and dropping into one of the hammocks that were suspended in the room, was soon sound asleep.

Morning comes.

Jesse explains what has happened to him since he rode away in the garb of a lancer captain.

The others listened spellbound.

It is just like the man to get into such a mess with the enemy.

The news brought by Jesse James necessitates immediate action on their part.

As the treasure-train will soon be at San Blas, they must be ready to do their work.

Others are to join them; two men of their own stamp, one of whom was along when the other treasure fell into their hands.

These men are probably waiting even now at the rendezvous.

As for Walter Dodd, when he hears what they have in hand, he begs to be excused from accompanying them.

"That isn't in my line, boys, you know," he laughs.

They are desperate cases, these two dare-devil brothers, and yet they can respect a man who prefers to lead a different kind of life from the one fortune has thrown about them.

Had the chance ever been given them, they would have chosen a different path, but circumstances have forced them into being what they are.

During the awful Civil War they were forced to join Quantrell's guerillas, and when the war ceased, persecution from local Federal officers drove them into outlawry.

Beyond these facts, no one ever attempts to defend the character of the James boys.

They grew to like their wild life and the terror their names inspired, came to hate nearly all men, debarred from that peace which is the natural heritage of man here below, and at times exulted in bloody deeds that would haunt most persons forever after, but which have not apparently caused the brothers much uneasiness, save when they saw the sword of retribution over them.

Their reckless daring is as well known as their cruelty toward those they might chance to look upon as their enemies.

Mounting, they bid the hospitable don farewell, and ride forth.

Yellow Top remains.

He is desperately in love, and yet hardly knows what to do about it.

Will Molly be content to live with him upon the small ranch he owns on the Pecos?

To himself the very thought is bliss.

He determines to find out.

So, ere the morning is gone he finds the opportunity he craves.

Molly is in the gardens with him, he has already told her his love, and now he speaks of the little ranch—will she be content there?

Her eyes, filled with love, answer, even before her lips frame the words.

She loves him so well that in the utmost corner of the earth, with him there, it will be home.

Walter is supremely happy.

He begs her to make the delay as brief as possible, for there is no reason why they should remain separated months, or even weeks.

Why not take a ride, call upon the old Pedro, who lives in his little cave-home like a monk, at the foot of the mountains, and have him make them man and wife?

There is nothing to hinder, she is of age and her own mistress, his business in Mexico has been completed, and it is necessary that he return to his ranch, but he is determined not to go alone.

It is a great temptation to her, she loves him so dearly, and the future looks so dark if she lets him ride away alone.

"To-morrow—let it be to-morrow, dear Walter," she falters.

He might insist and carry his point, but this is enough of a victory—he cannot be harsh.

"You promise to be mine then, to-morrow?" he breathes—he has his arms about and looks into the sweet blushing face, so near his own.

"Yes—I promise."

"Then, that is settled. I will wait over."

CHAPTER X.

SHOT IN THE BACK.

Jesse and Frank James have not gone far from San Blas, while the citizens of that borough are thinking of the recent events, and trying to put this thing and that together, so that they may understand the meaning of this invasion.

They realize that besides these American desperadoes those of their own country cannot hold a candle for daring and shrewdness.

What can be their game?

At the rendezvous they find three men.

All are of the same stripe as themselves, ready for any daredevil scheme, and reckless of the consequences, so long as there is a chance for plunder and excitement.

These five have determined that the treasure pack shall fall into their hands.

Their plans were made before, but circumstances have since arisen that necessitate a decided change, since there is another band of desperate men wooing the same fair goddess.

Jesse James tells his plan.

He believes in diplomacy.

Let the others do the work, and when the cat has pulled the chestnuts out of the fire, the monkey will eat them.

It is the old fable of the bear and the lion fighting over the booty, and when both lie down, utterly exhausted, the sly fox steals up and makes away with the spoils.

The five desperadoes plan for this.

They know when the train is due, and when Cortina and his men mean to gobble it up.

It is their intention then to be on hand and recover the spoils from the victors.

All are superbly mounted.

Weapons are looked over, and everything made ready for hot work, as it is certain that the Mexican and his bullies will not give up their prize without a desperate struggle.

Jesse James has his wounds dressed.

None of them are serious, although painful, as cuts from broken glass always are.

Thus time passes on.

When the shades of night gather they mount and leave the mountain gully that has secreted them for some time.

Before another morning breaks there will be strange deeds enacted in the Mexican country, not many miles from San Blas.

The full particulars of the train are in the possession of the leader.

A file of twenty soldiers, under the charge of a fighting lieutenant, guards the treasure.

Besides, there are twelve muleteers and some six other men hired by the owners, or filling that office themselves.

In all, they count thirty-seven.

And the American bravos are five.

Rather heavy odds these, and yet such devils as the James boys seldom stop to count.

They know the terror their name inspires, and also the value of the first rush.

It was their full intention to make an ambush and assault the thirty-seven men, dropping and scattering them like a flock of birds.

Now, the plans of Cortina will save them that trouble, though they must look elsewhere for the engagement they anticipate.

The desperate attack on the soldiers who were acting as convoy to the other train, and its capture by the James boys have given the alarm to the authorities, so that a larger force and better men attend each treasure train.

It matters not.

These worthies would find some way of getting at the nut inside the shell—they do not acknowledge defeat easily.

Nor has Jesse James forgotten his oath in the midst of other duties.

More than once he takes out the blade that was the cause of poor Jack Dutton's death, and grasping it by the handle, makes use of it upon an imaginary form in front.

He does not mean to leave Mexico until he has tracked Cortina to his death.

Riding leisurely along, these five men head for a certain spot where it is positive the treasure caravan will camp for the night.

In two hours they see lights ahead.

The sight is invigorating to them, as it declares that no mistake has been made.

Slowly and cautiously they advance.

If the men of Cortina are around, they are apt to run across them, unless very careful.

The horses are to be left at a certain point, and then a spot gained where they can watch the battle about to open.

In this they have no concern.

Their object is to pounce upon the victors and take the prize from their grasp.

Meanwhile, they believe they might as well enjoy the stirring scene as not.

Crawling stealthily along, the four follow the lead of their captain.

He knows how the land lies, and can take them to an elevation where they may have a view of the scene spread out before them.

Once or twice they find themselves near some of the enemy.

Cortina and his men are on the ground early.

They see that the camp is a strong one, and that it will require desperate work to carry it.

When, by the low muttering of voices, or the smell of a burning cigarette, Jesse James knows that he is approaching a picket post of the Mexicans, he changes his own course, and thus avoids them.

Presently they have reached a point where none of the enemy are to be found, and their progress now is not delayed.

Straight as an arrow from the bow he leads them on, and the point is gained.

It juts out from the face of the hill.

Standing on it, one can toss a biscuit three hundred feet down into the camp.

It is the only accessible point above commanding the position taken up by the soldiers, and Jesse James is surprised that Cortina has neglected to avail himself of its advantages.

There is not a sign of a living thing about.

They creep out—one, two, three, four, five of the shadowy figures—and gaze fixedly below.

What they see is a sight worth looking at, even through the eyes of one not interested in a pecuniary way.

Far down below, some hundreds of feet, gleam the camp-fires of the soldiers.

Their horses are packed in a natural corral, and guards are stationed above and below, so that a surprise seems impossible.

The position is well taken. It offers advantages of defense that makes it well-nigh impregnable, with men of the right stamp to defend it.

Here the fires gleam through the darkness; men sit around, or walk about. Some wear the uniform of soldiers, others the rough but picturesque dress of muleteers.

Sounds of laughter arise; then make merry with song and yarn, secure in the fact that the guards are wakeful, and their position safe.

Little do they dream of the danger that hovers over them—of the many dark, shadowy forms that hide in the chaparral, like jaguars ready to spring upon their prey.

Nothing can be seen of Cortina and his men, even from the elevation at which the five Americans look down upon the treasure camp. They mean to keep close until the signal is given, and this will not be until every man is in the position assigned to him by his leader.

Soon, however, the volcano will burst forth, and vomit out thunder and lightning.

Patiently the audience await the beginning of the performance; careless alike how it ends, they would be just as willing to set upon a remnant of the soldiers, as upon the Mexican bandits.

Just now they are quite indifferent as to how matters go.

Some of the soldiers, weary with the dusty ride of the day, throw themselves beside the fires to sleep, as the hour grows late.

Others look to the horses and mules, which must be put in good condition, for they are the main dependence of the journey.

The five men above have eyes but for one fact—at the foot of a tree lie the many strong sacks containing the silver they covet, and which they hope to take over the river as they did that of the former train.

One tent has been erected; this is for the commander of the expedition, the fighting lieutenant, especially selected because he has made a name for himself against the Apaches.

This officer is seen making the rounds ere retiring for the night.

He goes from one man to another in the manner of a careful officer, warning them what the penalty of negligence may be.

The men above see and smile.

They understand that Cortina has tackled a big job when he ventures to carry this military camp by storm, not that they doubt his ability, for he has himself served as a colonel in the regular Mexican army; is crafty, bold and fertile in expedients, and, last of all, his word is law among the unscrupulous fire-eaters who fight under the banner of the Border Firebrand.

Yes, it is a foregone conclusion in the mind of Jesse James that Cortina will come out ahead in the race, but before that climax is reached, he is morally certain there will be the biggest kind of a circus in this treasure camp.

Having done his duty, the lieutenant retires to his solitary tent.

He believes the camp secure.

Half an hour passes.

All this time the wolves of Cortina have been crawling stealthily along, each man for himself, and yet obeying his instructions to the letter.

Surely they must be in position by this time.

Around the fires few are seen awake, and these sit and smoke, or gamble with cards.

It is a national vice—Mexicans would gamble if condemned to die in an hour.

The men above have grown somewhat weary with waiting, and change their positions.

Patience!

The end is near.

Once Cortina gives the signal, and this sleepy hollow will awaken from its lethargy—yells and shots, the sounds of desperate warfare, must arouse the sleepy echoes of the hills.

There will be no more slumber this night for all who lie there so peacefully, except it be the last sleep, from which there is no awakening.

It is the keen eye of Jesse James that detects the form

of Cortina; he stands for a minute at a point where the light of the fires falls upon him.

The guard near by walks to and fro, in the regular routine of his beat; his head is bent low on his breast, so that he sees nothing.

Perhaps his thoughts, too, are far away; it may be with the happy home which he, alas, shall never look upon more, for the eye of the assassin has marked him for his prey.

"Watch closely; the ball is about to open."

At these words from their leader, the other four desperadoes peer down at the slumbering camp.

The Border Wolf stands in full view.

He no longer surveys the camp to see that everything is in readiness.

In his hands he carries a gun, and this is now raised to his shoulder, aimed at the unconscious sentry, who stands at the end of his beat a moment, looking across the camp.

Suddenly a puff of white smoke shoots out.

The report echoes among the beetling crags like a crash of thunder—heaven's artillery.

All can see that the shot counts.

The wretched sentry drops his gun, utters a shriek, staggers forward, and falls. He has been shot in the back by the robber chief.

Now the signal has been given.

Pandemonium breaks loose.

A rattle of firearms, accompanied by loud shouts, cause a deafening roar, for the walls of the cañon double each sound.

Those perched far above can see the spiteful flashes of flame that cut the darkness. Here, there and everywhere these spurt forth, and each mimic lightning means a leaden bolt hurled into the camp, perhaps to mow down a human being.

It is war with a vengeance—war, where the savage passions of men are fanned to fever heat by the presence of those silver sacks under the tree.

CHAPTER XI.

THE BATTLE OF THE CANON.

Cortina knows what he is doing.

He has planned the game well, and there is not the least chance in the world that his intended victims will escape him.

One by one they must fall, until the remnant, panic-stricken, throw their guns away and fly.

Already his men have made havoc in the ranks of the train's defenders.

The sentry Cortina himself shot is but one of a number who have fallen.

The worst of it is the fight is so one-sided that not a single number of the bandits has yet fallen; indeed, the soldiers have seen no one.

They seek cover.

Those above keep watch and ward, ready to praise any act of boldness.

It is entirely immaterial on which side the thing is done; the Kilkenny cats would suit them nicely in this case, for if the foes below kept up the bitter warfare until there was only a remnant of each party left, the James boys and their friends must have an easy time.

This is not likely to be the case.

Already they can guess the winner.

At the first alarm the fighting lieutenant bounds out of his tent.

He is no coward.

Well does he know that many a gun will be aimed at him—that his death is already a foregone conclusion.

Does he shrink?

A brave man never does.

He is wise enough to keep away from the smoldering fires, for at his first appearance several bullets have sung like mad hornets about his ears, telling him how eagerly the enemy seeks his death.

Such a catastrophe means much.

Not only does it concern himself, but the safety of the expedition as well.

Once their leader is gone, these Mexicans will not fight with any great ambition.

They are more apt to give in.

Hence, the lieutenant is wise to keep close and not rashly expose himself.

His voice is heard, calling upon his men to stand firm and keep close together, for well he knows the real shock of war is yet to come.

When the enemy get tired of this guerrilla warfare, they will make a rush.

This must come soon, for they can no longer see any of the soldiers or muleteers to pick them off at long range.

Signals are heard.

These come from Cortina.

He orders his men to close in.

Since they have done all the damage possible at long range, it is time some other plan is put in operation.

One thing is certain—the guerrillas will not allow the hours to slip by that will bring them toward daylight; that would be fatal.

Being in this thing for keeps, they must push it through to a speedy termination.

Already they close in.

Those above catch an occasional glimpse of one of the bandits now, as he springs from one place of concealment to another; the fires have been resuscitated by some fresh wood tossed from a safe distance, and the immediate surroundings are lighted up almost as by day.

It will not do for the defenders of the treasure caravan to allow the lights to go out; in the darkness their foes could slip in and steal the silver sacks, or else cut them down.

So, at any risk, they must keep them up.

Now and then a gun sounds.

It is the besieged who fire.

Some glimpse is had of a guerrilla dodging from tree to tree as he endeavors to keep under cover.

Once or twice a yell announces that such shots have not been thrown away.

As a general thing, however, they are wasted.

The fact which causes alarm in the mind of the lieutenant is this: On every occasion when a guerrilla is seen, he has been making his way from a point more remote to one nearer the camp.

It is easy to infer what that means.

They are slowly but surely advancing.

Ere long the death grapple must come.

Cortina knows his orders are being obeyed, and that his men by this time must be close upon the border of the camp.

He has arranged a cunning trick.

The idea is to make the enemy expose themselves and then mow them down.

All the while he has kept track of the lieutenant and knows where he is hiding.

Then the mock attack must be made at the other side of the camp.

A signal sounds.

The clump of men under Pedro break out into a shout, raise their arms, and are seen leaping into the lower end of the camp.

Doubting not that the long-expected attack has come, the lieutenant shouts his orders, and with the men who are around him, starts for the scene of the threatened invasion.

It is a fatal move.

In so doing they uncover themselves to the crouching foes, who wait near by with guns ready for murderous business.

Too late the lieutenant realizes this.

It is when the weapons begin to sound in his rear, and he finds his men going down all around him that he sees his error.

The trap has been sprung.

It is too late now to think of remedying the error; all that remains is to push forward and endeavor to die gallantly.

His men, however, are panic-stricken by the fearful fire from the rear.

It happens that they are not made of the same stern stuff as the lieutenant.

A dozen or more manage to reach the place where their comrades battle hand to hand with Pedro and his desperate gang.

The coming of this reinforcement, headed by the gallant officer, inspires new courage in the hearts of his men, and their assault upon the bandits is so fierce, that for the time being it looks as though victory is within their grasp.

Alas! those with Pedro constitute but a small fraction of the enemy opposed to them.

From all quarters the guerrillas are running to the support of their comrades.

Cortina, at the head of quite a band, dashes through the camp, to fall upon the soldiers from the rear with terrible effect.

Those above watch this awful scene complacently.

The more the merrier, they think.

It suits their bloodthirsty humor, and will make their task the easier.

The collision occurs.

All is now a bewildering whirl of mad conflict, where soldiers and muleteers engage hand to hand with the eager bandits.

It is such a scene as the wild Southwest has many a time witnessed, when the passions of men gain the mastery, and they meet in warfare.

A pack of tigers fighting in the arena cannot exceed their ferocity.

The lieutenant still lives.

So long as his towering figure is seen, and his clarion

voice rings out, his followers will keep up the unequal combat, but as soon as they are no longer nerved by his inspiring presence, the game will be thrown up.

Cortina knows this.

Hence, he redoubles his efforts to down the officer.

Several of his men have the same laudable ambition in view; they recognize the fact that this brave fellow is the keystone to the arch, and, once he is gone, the structure must surely fall.

The lieutenant is doomed.

He knows it.

Everywhere he turns he meets savage blows aimed at his life; he could save himself by flight, but scorns to do so.

Like a brave officer, he goes down with his ship.

Happy Mexico, to have such a son! All honor to the man who thus serves his country.

He goes down.

It is inevitable with such tigers around him.

Even the men above, watching this engagement with such interest, respect bravery, and they cannot but give a groan when they see the man suddenly totter and fall heavily.

He has been shot by a coward unawares, but his last effort in life is to run his sword through the wretch who murders him.

No longer his towering form is seen; they can hear his inspiring voice no more.

A panic seizes his men.

They think of flight.

The treasure has been defended at a terrible cost, as bravely as the most exacting could expect.

Now they think of self.

Is there any chance of escape?

Each man is for himself.

The guerrillas have orders to let them go when the break comes, and hence an opening occurs, where the defeated soldiers, casting away guns and other weapons, rush down the valley.

On the succeeding day they will bring up in San Blas, with terrible accounts of the engagement, of course making it appear that they were attacked by a regular army of guerrillas.

Such is the Mexican character.

On this night, however, these men have proved that they can fight as well as boast.

The border battle is over.

Those above are disappointed in one thing.

It had been too unequal to suit them.

Had the forces engaged been more closely distributed, there would be fewer left in the camp now to give them trouble.

As the first scene in the drama is over, they will now arrange the next.

The outlaws are numerous.

To attack them would be madness; there must be strategy used to meet the emergency.

All this has been arranged, and Jesse James intends to carry the scheme through.

Down in the camp there is much bustle going on; some of the outlaws have been wounded, others killed in the conflict.

The former are looked after, while the bodies of the latter they throw into a black abyss near by for a double

purpose—it saves them the trouble of making graves, and at the same prevents future recognition, for all through this affair the Mexican brigand has endeavored to make out that he is the notorious Jesse James, leading a band of cut-throats upon a new expedition. The glory that came to the Yankee outlaw from his former escapades shall come to him again without any of the spoils.

There are some wounded soldiers.

These they take care of.

Two Americans, whose fortunes have been thrown in with the Mexicans, are made to attend to them, and these worthies impress upon the minds of the soldiers the fact that this valiant deed has been the work of the great Jesse James.

After such an affair, the whole north of Mexico would ring with the story.

It would be impossible for the Americans to prove it false in any particular.

They must take the blame.

This is the third time of late that the artful Cortina has played this game.

He seems to think it fine fun.

Perhaps, could he but know whose eyes are fastened upon him at the moment when, flushed with victory, he stands near the glowing fires, he would not feel so easy.

The silver bags are not touched.

As he has men in his gang whom he does not trust out of sight, a guard is placed around the tree, at the foot of which the treasure lies.

Thus it may be deemed secure.

A strange metamorphosis has taken place here within the last hour.

No longer do the soldiers sleep around the fire; in their stead lie the brigands of Cortina.

That worthy himself retires to the tent erected for the brave lieutenant, whose body lies where it fell, the bloody sword still grasped in a hand that has formed fingers of ice about the weapon.

All is still, save the groans of the wounded.

From up the mountain cañon come the howl of wolves and coyotes, scenting from afar the blood of battle, and eager for the feast.

It is getting near time for the next act in the border tragedy to take place.

The actors are all there and await the signal.

New scenes are preparing.

CHAPTER XII.

A SPY IN THE CAMP.

Jesse James has made a discovery.

The brigands have prisoners.

Who they are he cannot tell, as they are kept back from the fires.

Frank declares that one is a female, and even asserts his belief that the man is no other than their cowboy friend, Walter Dodd.

At any rate, they are kept under guard.

When the camp is given over to slumber, the leader of the five men declares the time has come for them to descend.

They have seen all that is possible from their elevated position, and now a chance offers to take a part in the affair.

Their hour is at hand.

So they creep down the height in the same manner in which they ascended.

As the outlaws have guards posted it will not do to be careless; they neither wish to invite an attack, nor do they care to even disclose their presence to the enemy.

Finally they find themselves down.

The camp lies close by.

Here Jesse James leaves the others, bent upon a dangerous mission that suits his fierce and reckless mood.

He goes to ascertain who the captives are, and rescue them if they prove to be the friends Frank has declared.

Besides he remembers his oath.

This night it shall be fulfilled.

A man of his experience could find little difficulty in passing a sentry, especially when that sentry is dead, as he certainly is after Jesse James gets through with him.

It is an old trick—a dark form creeping up, a pebble tossed beyond to attract attention, the fingers of iron compressing a trachea, and a keen blade finding his heart.

One more life for Jesse James to account for.

What does it matter? He cares not.

The way is now clear for his advance, and he is soon within the camp.

As the fires have burned low, he can move about with a certain degree of security.

First of all he turns to the spot where he remembers having seen the prisoners.

It is as Frank said; the two captives are no other than Walter and Molly.

They have been unfortunate enough to fall into the power of the guerrillas late in the day, while in the vicinity of the old *padre's* cave.

Walter defended his wife valiantly, but the guerrillas were too many for him, and finally the Texan was overpowered and secured.

While he lies there, looking up at the bright stars, seen between the walls of the cañon, he hears a low voice, a mere whisper.

"Walter!"

Who calls his name?

Is it a dream?

He looks toward Molly; poor girl, her face is wreathed in a smile; it parts her lips; perhaps she has spoken his name while she sleeps.

"Walter—Yellow Top!"

Ha! this time there can be no mistake, the voice comes from beyond, and he strains his neck to look in that direction.

Some one is crouching near him. An electrical thrill gives the Texan hope.

He utters a sibilant sound.

"Are you awake?" comes a whisper.

"Yes—who are you?"

The unknown creeps up to him.

"It is Jesse James!" is hissed in his ear.

"Thank Heaven!" breathes Walter.

A hand gropes about his person. The bonds are found and severed.

He is free.

"Who is this?" asks the desperado.

"Molly Turner, my wife."

Jesse James expresses no surprise; he has too much

business on his hands to make more trouble than he can help.

"She must be saved, too. Do you awaken her," he says, in the Texan's ear.

Walter is stiff and sore, but he knows there is no time for foolishness, so he takes the blade thrust into his hand, and immediately bends over the beloved form near by.

Only Molly's hands are tied. They know she will never think of leaving him, even were the guards less vigilant than they are.

Bending down, Walter presses a kiss upon her lips. Her beautiful eyes open with a start.

"Be silent, dear Molly; we have a chance to escape. Friends are here to aid us, but all depends upon ourselves. Do not speak, I beg."

He knows she understands, for as he shows her the knife she raises her bound hands, which in a moment are free from their cruel cords.

As yet they are not noticed.

The two men who act as guards for the bags of silver are not far away, but their backs are turned to this quarter.

Jesse James again whispers to the cowboy.

"You will find Frank and his friends at the clump of mesquites just beyond that big boulder up the cañon. He looks for you."

A pressure of the hand—it is enough.

Words are not necessary under circumstances like these to tell the feeling of the heart—a look and the pressure of fingers speak more eloquently.

Jesse James has done at least one good deed in his life; he has need of many such to help balance his crimes before the bar of heaven.

Walter and Molly creep away.

The outlaw waits until they are gone before he makes a single move.

Does he aim for the treasure?

Not so—he hardly deigns to glance that way, save to make sure that the guards are not observing him—time enough for that.

If his plans carry out the treasure will fall into their hands before six hours have passed away.

Just now he is thinking of his oath.

He creeps toward the tent.

So silently does he advance that the sleepy eyes of the sentinels do not heed them.

If at any time they fall upon his form stretched upon the earth, they take it for granted that this is one of their comrades.

So he reaches the tent.

There he listens.

The fire in front enters the tent, the flap being raised, and when Jesse James raises a portion of the canvas to peep beneath, he sees a form stretched upon a cot of raw.

Then he prepares to enter.

With the keen blade he slowly slits the canvas, and thus makes an opening.

Gently he passes through this.

He is now in the same tent with his mortal foe. One of them must not leave it alive, and, of course, he has already decided that the one to remain shall be the Mexican.

Cortina sleeps heavily.

His breathing announces this. Perhaps he has tested the *aguardiente* in his flask too often ere retiring.

Jesse James bends over him.

The demon of blood is in his eyes as he glares upon his helpless foe.

Mercy!

Seldom has the man ever known it.

For years has his hand been raised against the world, as the world has been against him, so that he has come to think of no one but himself.

He gloats upon the victim whom fate has thus placed in his power.

Some strange intuition causes Cortina to awaken at just this critical moment.

He recognizes the man who bends over him so savagely, and knows retribution has come for taking the name of Jesse James in vain.

The danger paralyzes him.

Sometimes even the bravest of men may be thrown into a fit of consternation by such a sudden awakening.

Death is very near him.

His eyes are glued upon the shining blade.

With all his strength he grasps the arm that wields the knife, at the same time uttering a hoarse cry.

One good his cries have done.

The camp is aroused while the two men are struggling. Men can be heard shouting outside, and running in the direction of the tent.

Jesse James wrenches his arm free. He knows he must now fight his way out of the camp, and the sooner he is at it the better for him.

He hears the awful roar of voices outside; the warning must be heeded.

With a curse he plunges the knife into the body of the writhing man below him, and then springs to his feet ready to run the gantlet.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE DRUGGED POOL.

He draws a long breath and sets his teeth hard, while a terrible look comes upon his face.

Then snatching out a revolver in either hand, he suddenly dashes out of the tent, with the fury of the prairie storm.

The Mexican *guerrilleros* see him. They recognize him as an enemy, and immediately a great shout goes up.

Without a second's delay, the American desperado charges into the midst of them; he does not wait to count noses, or to pick his course, but flies to the attack.

Instantly a wild scene ensues.

Surrounded by the Mexicans, Jesse James fires right and left, knocking over men as though they are tenpins.

All is over in a minute.

He drags them through the camp; it is like a pack of wolves endeavoring to attack a bear.

Then come shots from among the trees; his enemies, alarmed, fall back.

Jesse James vanishes from view.

He believes he has accomplished his vow.

The next thing on the programme is the silver treasure under the tree.

How shall they secure it?

The bandits in camp are partially demoralized.

They will be even more so if Cortina has really been slain by the knife.

Perhaps an attack might pay.

Jesse James decides not.

Those men are fighters—he ought to know, for he has been among them—and will shed their last blood ere giving up the treasure secured through such difficulty.

He has a better plan.

Sometimes it pays to be a diplomat.

During his checkered career this man has more than once given evidence that he possesses a mind of no mean calibre.

Had it been trained in the proper channel, Jesse James had not lived as a border ruffian.

The camp has once more become quiet.

None of the bandits can be seen.

Sleep is to visit their eyes no more this night.

Since they have learned of the presence of their enemies near by, every man is ready and anxious to do guard duty.

It may mean life or death.

Again Jesse James leaves the rest.

It is nearly morning.

Already the first streaks of dawn have appeared over the tops of the distant mountains in the east.

Walter Dodd and his wife are with the rest, having found no difficulty in discovering the mesquite bushes.

They look upon the outlaw as a friend; he has saved them from a terrible fate, and whatever his past may have been, to them he is close indeed. Who can blame them for feeling thus toward the man who risked much to rescue them?

Jesse James steals through the undergrowth that fills the gorge, until he is close to the camp.

Then he sits down in a hiding-place to watch.

He is close enough to hear some of the men conversing. One is taunting another about being afraid; the other retorts by daring the first to leave the camp with a bucket and fill it at the spring.

This the man swears to do.

Picking up a bucket he passes within five feet of the hidden bushwhacker, who, leaving his place of concealment, follows him.

Does he mean murder?

No; other thoughts are in the heart of Jesse James.

He seeks the spring from which the camp gets its supply of clear, sparkling water.

It is soon found.

There the Mexican, in the faint light of early morning, is seen dipping some of the pellucid liquid up with the bucket.

Although he has taken up the gauntlet thrown down

by his companion, it is evident that he is not fully at in his mind.

While he labors to force the bucket beneath the surface of the little pool, he glances suspiciously around, a second look upon his face, as if in every bush he sees an enemy ready to pounce upon him.

Jesse James remains hidden.

The Mexican, having half filled his bucket, moves toward the camp.

He follows the path.

This brings him so close to the hidden man that the latter could put out his hand and touch him, did he desire.

He makes no such move; the man passes on in safety, and, did he but know how close he has been to the terrible American, he would bless his lucky stars that this hour did not see him a corpse.

When the man has quite passed out of sight, Jesse James issues from his place of hiding.

He stands upon the border of the spring.

This seems to be a pool lying in the rock.

It is about three feet in diameter by half that in depth. So far as one can see, it does not appear to have any inlet or outlet, and yet the water is clear and cold.

As the desperado looks down upon the pool, a diabolical smile appears on his face.

It will answer his purpose well.

Quickly he takes from his pocket a small package, done up in stout paper.

He has carried this a long time, but its hour has certainly come at last.

Tearing off a corner, he scatters the powder it contained over the water.

Then catching up a stick, he stirs the pool with it until every vestige of the powder is gone.

As if not fully satisfied, the man bends down and lifts some of the water to his mouth, using his hand as a cup.

Then he shakes his head, ejects the water from his mouth, and grins again.

"I defy them to tell anything is wrong with that," he mutters.

What has he done?

Poisoned the pool?

The near future will tell; but, villain though he is, hardly seems possible Jesse James would sink to such wholesale murder.

He once more hides in a spot where he can observe the camp.

The Mexicans are waking to the fact that it is time to get breakfast.

One man, in stepping back, clumsily upsets the bucket of water. Jesse James chuckles at the catastrophe. H

ever knew before how much he loved a stumbling, clumsy fool.

Another gives utterance to some Spanish oaths, and the culprit goes for more to the pool, which he hastens to do without a word.

Thus some of the water which received the benefit of the gray powder is brought into camp.

In turn all will imbibe.

Some take it straight.

Others get it in their coffee.

Every man will probably feel the effects of it before long, and, watching each one drink, the plotter among the bushes rubs his hands with delight, and nods his head approvingly.

Let the work go on.

Ere another hour has passed he believes the game will be in his hand.

Furtive glances are cast toward the pile of silver sacks,aped under the tree; the mules to carry them are in the corral, and, with expert men to handle the treasure, all can be quickly done.

He watches the camp more closely now.

When the man who took the first drink at the bucket of sparkling water, raises his arms above his head and yawns, Jesse James grins.

The gray powder is getting in its work.

In five minutes the fellow sits down.

His head seems too heavy for his neck; it rolls from side by side, and finally the man curls himself down upon the ground.

"Number one," mutters the desperado, his eyes fastened eagerly upon his victim.

And presently others also show signs.

Their limbs feel like lead.

A strange buzzing attacks their brains, as if a hive of hornets had found lodging there.

Others drop down.

In various positions they lie there, seemingly hewn out of the solid rock for all the life they show.

The few who are still left become panic-stricken by this fearful sight.

Their turn may come next.

In vain they try to arouse the still forms scattered about the camp; it is useless.

Then as they feel the black pall descending upon their bodies and brains, they act like demons broken loose from the confines of Hades.

Some fall down and grovel in the dirt.

Others tear their hair out by the handfuls.

All shriek and curse by turns.

An inexorable fate has them in its grip.

Howl as they may they cannot escape.

One by one they succumb.

It is certainly the most terrible picture upon which the eyes of mortal man have ever rested, and yet the one who is responsible for it all stands near by and laughs.

That proves the devil to be in his heart.

The shouts gradually die down to groans; these in turn become murmurs; then a deathly silence falls upon the cañon.

Overhead the eagle screams as he looks down; buzzards and vultures cast their shadows upon the walls, for the sun has arisen; but in the camp a solemn hush reigns.

All is done.

Nothing now remains but to call the others to the spot and make way with the treasure.

Jesse James strides into the camp.

Standing in the midst he looks around; it is like Satan surveying his unholy work.

He seems to feel no remorse; on the contrary, he rubs his hands gleefully, standing there.

Then he steps over and raises one of the pouches.

"Well filled, too. A pretty haul, I declare."

Thus muttering, he proceeds to count the pouches.

While doing so he hears a sound, and, turning, beholds a Mexican covering him with a gun.

The man is not more than ten feet away.

His face is stamped with an expression of horror, and evidently he is one of the sentries, who chanced to be posted at a distance, and as yet has not tasted the drugged waters of the pool.

He has seen his comrades succumb to the terrible influence, and his very soul is sick with horror at the spectacle.

When Jesse appears on the scene, the man recognizes in him the author of the outrage, and resolves to make him pay for it with his life, even though he lose his own in the bargain.

He does not know with whom he trifles.

Men better than he have crossed swords with this Missouri outlaw, to go down to death.

"*Carissima!* hound, devil, this is your work!" he grits, between his teeth.

Jesse James looks in the black muzzle of that gun, and knows that a pressure of the finger will send him before the Judgment Bar to answer for his sins, but, for all that, he does not show the white feather.

"*Hola, señor!* what do you mean?" he asks.

The Mexican is yellow indeed with fear and rage—his eyes sparkle like those of the far-famed hooded cobra as it crests its head to strike.

"You have murdered my comrades—I shall now take your life, too!" he cries.

"Pardon me, you mistake—they are not dead, they only sleep. As to the man who did this deed, he is there, just back of you—Jesse James!"

As the outlaw thus exclaims, his words, and the mention of that already well-known name, causes the Mexican to start and instantly turn his head around to see his other foe.

Like a flash the desperado's hand seeks a weapon, the revolver is discharged from the hip, apparently without any aim, and the unlucky Mexican falls over with a crash, shot through the heart.

"That's what fools get," mutters the Missouri outlaw, spurning the still writhing body with his boot, as he turns and walks toward the clump of mesquites.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE TRAP.

He finds the others awaiting him.

They wait anxiously for his report, as none of them thoroughly understood what his latest scheme fully was.

"Are you ready, boys?" he asks.

The men declare in the affirmative.

Of course this means if they can lay hands on that treasure. They do not mean to quit this region without that first.

"Then follow me."

He leads them away from the camp.

They wonder at this until the spot is reached where they left their horses.

"Mount!"

He gives up his own horse to Molly.

"It is only for a short time; you will soon have a good nag—the pick of the corral," he says, in answer to her expostulations.

This tells the story.

They are not to leave the treasure camp yet.

The party soon enter the camp where such strange changes have taken place.

First it is the peaceful camp of the convoy of the mule train bearing the silver treasure.

Then comes the wild midnight attack, the awful scenes of carnage, the shock of battle, and the defeat of the soldiers.

After that the mountain bandits take possession, and in turn they are aroused to meet the assault of Jesse James and his gang, at the time the prisoners are released.

Last of all comes the scene which the American outlaw has witnessed from the bushes.

When the party enter the camp, they look around with wonder in their eyes.

Never did such a scene greet the vision of human beings since the world began.

It is the enchanted kingdom over again, where all the subjects are bound in sleep, only there is no charming princess, or bold prince to awaken her with the magic kiss.

A wave of horror sweeps over Walter.

"Are they dead?" he asks.

Jesse James laughs.

With his boot he punches one of the wretches in the ribs; the man utters a dismal grunt, but does not open his eyes.

"This is wonderful. How did you manage to accomplish it?" he asks.

"Drugged 'em," is the laconic reply.

Business demands their attention.

In this Walter has no concern.

He would not take an ounce of the silver in those bags stained as it is by the blood of brave men, for the work and yet under such circumstances one would think might do so, seeing that it is now wrested from the hands of thieves.

His business is to pick out a couple of fine horses, going to the corral, his well-trained eye soon finds animals he wants. His own steed and that of Molly with the horses of the Mexican outlaws, left some number away.

Meanwhile Jesse James and his gang are busily engaged fastening the silver bags to the backs of horses found in the corral.

These are the animals formerly belonging to the soldiers, and are selected now in preference to the mules because they may make faster time, and that is an object to these men.

They may be pursued.

In two hours all is done.

They are ready to move.

Jesse James gives the word to mount.

"Wait one minute," says Walter.

Molly has asked for a drink, and stepping over to the water bucket, he picks up the gourd it contains, fills it, and walks toward her.

As he passes Jesse James, now mounted, the latter stretches out his foot, and, with one kick, sends gourd and contents flying through space.

Walter looks at him in amazement.

"Rather a queer way of saying so, but I don't want you to drink that water, old man," says the desperado, with a chuckle.

"Why not?"

Jesse James waves his hand around.

"D'ye see these fools? They drank it; behold the result, Walter."

"Ah! the water is drugged?"

"Yes."

"You did it?"

The man on horseback nods.

"I dosed the pool close by. There are more ways than one to circumvent greasers," he answers, laconically.

"Come, mount Walter. We will find water inside of an hour."

They leave the camp.

All is still silent as death there.

A stranger happening on the scene, would fain believe these men must have lain down in the poisonous shade of some American upas tree.

An hour later they draw up at a spring, to refresh themselves and their animals, for it is a long journey to the ford at which they mean to cross the Rio Grande.

"How long will those men sleep?" asks Walter, who holds himself near the leader.

"Probably six hours or so, according to the amount of water they drank."

"Do you think they will pursue us?"

"I don't know; it may be possible, but we have a good heart, and they have to go after their horses, so that, taken all, it's hardly likely they'll catch up this side of the river. Once on American soil, we'll make it hot for 'em."

"One or two escaped the drug."

"What?"

"While you were working, I wandered around the camp looking for my lasso, and, coming across the tent, I slept in."

"I guess you saw how I kept my oath then. I put this knife through Cortina, when all that row was raised in camp," holding up the blade and looking at its sanguinary hue.

"Then you didn't put it in the right place," declares Walter, quietly.

"What do you mean?" growls the other.

"Cortina lives!"

Jesse James utters a fierce cry.

"How do you know that?"

"I saw him in that tent. A woman was there, too. Cortina had his left arm bandaged up. They both glared at me like tigers, but said nothing."

"His left arm; I put the knife there instead of his heart. A curse on the luck. I've a notion to turn back."

"Why?"

"To keep my oath—to kill Cortina."

"Perhaps you may get the chance yet; they may pursue us."

"If he lives, I am sure they will. The sleep will not last so long; they will arouse the men. The whole thing was a beastly job."

Jesse James is enraged, but at himself.

Had any other man been to blame he must feel the weight of his displeasure at once.

They ride on.

He looks back now and then to see whether pursuit is yet made.

Their journey northward lies through the mountainous region to the Rio Grande.

If not overtaken by the next morning they will have reached the river, and in all probability the pursuit will cease.

As the day begins to decline they are descending the mountains.

In the distance glimpses are to be seen of the river that serves as a boundary between two countries.

Their animals are tired.

Hence it will be utterly out of the question for them to reach the ford to-night, even if they could travel in the darkness.

As yet there has been no signs of pursuit.

Jesse James had expected none until he heard that Cortina still lived; then his ideas on the subject were changed.

Night draws near.

Where shall they camp?

The outlaw has become more and more convinced that they will be attacked before morning, and he lays his plans accordingly.

A spot is selected down in the valley.

From this point they can see where the trail comes down from the ridge above.

Under the orders of Jesse James, they set to work. Many things have to be done ere they are ready for the night's work.

First of all, he hunts for a place to stow away the treasure, so that in case they have to fly, it will remain secreted, that at some future time they may come and reclaim it.

Accident favors them.

While walking about, Frank James stumbles over some object, and falls into a clump of bushes.

He calls for his brother.

"See here what I have found; a hole in the ground; who would suspect it?"

Sure enough. Many years before it has doubtless been the den of some wild animal, but the bushes have utterly concealed it.

Here is just the place to hide the treasure.

They are careful not to trample down the bushes or to make any trail to the place, so that it may be discovered.

When they have accomplished this they believe one good work has been done.

Much more remains.

Their own riding horses are taken quite a distance away, where they are left in such a condition that they will be ready in case immediate flight is necessary.

Then they once more return.

The main camp is prepared; the pack horses placed in a rude corral, where their numbers cannot be counted.

A fire is made and supper cooked.

After this, Jesse James explains his plan to the others; and it receives their approval.

If this night passes quietly they can make the ford by noon the next day.

All depends then upon the hours of darkness.

With this idea in view they plan.

Molly signifies her willingness to remain at the lower camp where the riding horses are. Walter has secured a revolver for her while in the bandit's camp, and she has no fear.

Under the circumstances, all agree that this is the best thing to do.

Walter sees her comfortable.

Then, acting under the orders of Jesse James, he returns again to the upper camp.

Against such foes as Cortina and his followers, the Texan is willing to fight shoulder to shoulder with the James boys and their crowd.

It is a question of life and death; yes, even more than that should they fall into the power of these cruel followers of the *contrabandista*.

When he once more reaches the camp, he finds that all the others have not been idle.

By the light of the fire they have partially disrobed, wrapping each a blanket around their persons in place of outer garments.

Then the cast-off clothes are filled with dead grass, and made to look as though they contained human forms.

Walter looks on in amazement.

At first he thinks his comrades must have lost their minds.

Then the truth breaks upon him.

He sees in this thing a charming plan to hoodwink their enemies.

"Do likewise, Yellow Top," sings out Frank James.

The Texan is not slow to follow.

It does not take him long to fill his outer garments with the withered grass that grows in bunches around the camp.

These mock figures are placed in position.

One lies on his side.

A second being on his back, has his sombrero pulled over his face, apparently.

Taken all in all, the whole six look wonderfully natural in the bright firelight, and, when the blaze goes down, this deceptive appearance will increase.

Jesse James steps back to view them critically.

"Splendid, boys. If those greasers ain't fooled to a man, I'll eat my hat!" he cries

The others agree with him.

They have nothing more to do but arrange the fire so

that it will burn steadily, but not too brightly, and to retire to the hiding-place near by, which Jesse James already selected for them.

The trap is set.

CHAPTER XV.

THE PHANTOM HORSEMEN.

The time passes slowly.

As there is no necessity for all to keep awake, so sleep while others watch.

It seems as though hours have gone since night set in and yet there have been no signs seen or heard of the enemies.

Walter, in a sitting position, sleeps with his back resting against a tree.

Once he has seen Jesse James go into the camp.

The latter seems to be arranging something in the tent above the fire.

When he comes back. He has a string in his hand which he secures.

Walter Dodd is dreaming of some far-away land when he feels a hand clutch his arm.

He awakens.

"Look!" comes in a chuckle from his side.

He sees the arm of Jesse James raised, and, following the range of the pointed finger, finds himself gazing upward at the hill.

Over the bare top of this runs the trail which they have passed along not many hours before.

There, outlined against the bright sky beyond, he sees the figure of a man on horseback.

It is impossible to tell whether he may be Mexican, Yankee, or Apache; all that they can see is that it is horse and rider.

There is no reason for doubt.

This must be the foremost of their pursuers—the bandits whom Jesse James drugged.

Both men gaze eagerly at the dark figure.

Neither says a word.

They see the man turn in his saddle, as though he were passing the word along.

Then he moves forward and vanishes below the crest of the incline.

His place is immediately taken by a second, and the same manoeuvre gone through with.

The fire is seen; they know they have discovered the camp of those they seek, and farther down the side of the hill they will leave their animals, and creep upon their prey.

After this man comes a third.

Jesse James counts.

He reaches twenty-four, and then the phantom procession comes to a stop.

Four to one!

The odds are apparently in favor of the Mexicans, but ingenuity can sometimes do greater wonders than mere force or numbers.

"Wake up the rest!"

These words were useless, for every man of them has been awake for some time, and has watched the passage of the spectre riders.

They know that the engagement about to take place will be to the death.

Each man has grimly determined to make it exceedingly hot for the Mexicans.

The assault will not be long in coming, and Jesse James proceeds to post his men.

Several mount trees, among the limbs of which they may have a good view of the camp, and get their work in to deadly advantage when the leader gives the arranged signal.

Others hide behind the trunks of trees, or lie upon the ground.

All know what the signal is to be that must call for a deadly fire.

The cord which Jesse James holds is the instrument for giving this.

He has saturated a bundle of rags with oil from a lantern; this ball is held up in the tree, directly over the fire, by means of the taut cord.

When the time comes his knife will cut the cord, the oil-ball falls among the red embers of the fire, and instantly a blaze flashes up, illuminating the camp like day for several minutes.

This is only another of those cunning little schemes for which this man has always been noted.

They have more than once served him a good turn when beset by difficulties.

Some people say it is better to be born lucky than rich; in the wilds of the West it is certainly profitable to be an ingenious man, ready to meet every coming emergency.

Walter is one of those in the trees.

Crouching among the gnarled forks, with a gun in his hand, secured, with other weapons, from the camp of the sleeping bandits, he watches for signs of their coming.

It is a time of grave suspense.

The next hour will tell the story.

Either the Mexicans will be so badly defeated that they will give the retreating Americans no more trouble, or else something not down on the bills will take place ere long.

An owl hoots near by. Is that an omen of bad luck to the little party?

Father off the sound of wolves and coyotes can be heard, as if the sagacious scavengers scent the coming battle in the air.

Once Walter hears a sound that gives him some uneasiness, and his thoughts go out to brave Molly, sleeping near the horses, half a mile further down the valley.

It is the distant cry of a wild animal that has caused the disquiet within him.

He knows the sound well.

Down in Central Mexico he has many a time tracked and shot jaguars.

One of the fierce brutes is abroad now, searching the forest for its prey.

Please Heaven that it does not discover the sleeping girl down in the valley.

Again his thoughts go back.

He can see all the events that connect their lives and make them one.

A singular time and place to think of such things, but thought knows no bounds, and often plays the oddest of pranks.

At length Walter has his mind brought to bear upon the scene before him.

He thinks he has seen a movement along the bushy border of the little glade.

Almost holding his breath, he watches the spot, clutching his gun fiercely, as he remembers what a debt he owes these men; what would have been his fate and Molly's had not rescue come at the hands of friends.

The thought arouses a demon within; he no longer feels merciful.

When the time comes for action, the Texan will be found on deck, doing his duty.

He watches the bushes.

Perhaps it was a false alarm.

At any rate the Mexicans cannot be far away, for the owl has stopped hooting, and he hears it flap its wings in flying away, as though the creeping figures below have caused alarm.

A dead silence rests over the camp.

It is a deceptive stillness.

A suspicious old ranger might deem it worth investigation.

The chances are, however, that the Mexicans, flushed with anticipated victory, and filled with blind rage at their recent defeat, will see only the recumbent forms lying there as though sleep had overcome them.

Ah! this time Walter makes no mistake.

The bushes are noiselessly parted.

A white face is thrust out, and its owner hastily surveys the camp.

He seems to be counting the motionless forms by the deceptive light of the fire.

Then once more the bushes close; the spy has gone again to make his report.

Another period elapses—perhaps five minutes—when the bushes again separate.

There can be no mistaking the face that is now thrust forth; the black mustache, drooping down, gives it the fierce aspect for which Cortina has long been noted.

It is indeed the Border Terror.

Jesse James, in the hurry of his escape from the tent, instead of driving his knife into the man's heart as he intended, simply gave him a painful wound in the left arm.

So much for haste.

As he looks upon him now, he swears that the Mexican leader will not get away again.

This night Jesse James keeps his oath.

Walter watches the scene with a sort of fascination words cannot describe.

He sees the man step out until his whole figure comes under his observation.

Then Cortina turns and makes a motion with his one well arm; it is a signal to his men.

They appear.

The bushes silently separate hither and yon as men emerge and crouch in the open.

Like so many human tigers they lie there, silent and eager for blood.

Not a word has been uttered; everything is done by motions from the chief.

The fire burns, but only in a half-way style, so that the glade is illuminated only to a certain extent.

This is just as Jesse James intended.

The Mexicans can see their intended victims stretched out on the ground, but they are not able to notice the fraud practiced upon them.

All is well—for the men lying in wait in the neighboring trees.

Cortina seems to glance around as if to make sure that all his men are present.

Then he gives another signal.

Rising to his feet he waves his arms.

This means advance!

Like a lot of wolves creeping upon their slumbering quarry, the Mexicans go on.

Some creep upon hands and knees, others walk, but bend far over.

All are very careful to make no noise, for they have a great dread for those terrible Americans, and expect rough treatment unless they can slaughter them in their sleep.

No doubt more than one man among them chuckles to himself at the soft snap fortune has kindly thrown in their way.

They do not know that dame yet.

She is capricious.

One cannot always depend on her moods.

Things are not always as they seem.

To look upon those two dozen men sneaking across the glade in the dim light of the dying camp-fire, one would be astonished to think that some sense of coming danger does not arouse the slumbering forms.

They move not.

Nearer the assassins creep.

Every man holds some sort of weapon in his hands it may be gun, pistol or knife, but always a tool with which terrible damage may be inflicted upon his foes.

Already they have half crossed the glade.

The distance separating them from the recumbent forms is not over twenty feet.

As if acting under orders, the men have advanced, spreading out in something the shape of an open fan.

Thus none will get in the way of comrades while discharging their firearms.

Cortina arises to his full height.

His men do likewise.

It is as though they are now sure of their game, and intend to send a volley into the sleepers.

The time has come.

Jesse James lets his keen-edged knife drop on the cord; the oil-ball falls into the fire!

CHAPTER XVI.

CONCLUSION.

It is done none too soon.

In another moment Cortina would be calling upon his men to fire, and the poor, inoffensive garments of the six men be riddled with the savage bullets.

As the oiled ball of rags drops in among the embers of the fire, a flame shoots up as if by magic, and the glade no longer lies half hidden in the shadows of the surrounding trees.

On the contrary, it is lighted, as if by electricity; every minute object is disclosed to view.

The Mexicans, amazed, look at the still forms upon which they have been about to vent their rage.

In the new light they can see better, and realize the awful deception put upon them.

Horror, despair, both fill their hearts.

They look around in mortal terror.

Flight—it is useless to think of it, they are in a trap, a terrible pitfall.

One or two sharp-witted fellows instantly drop flat, and hug the ground.

More would follow the good example thus set, but they are not given time.

From out among the trees close by shoots a tongue of fire, dazzling in its intensity.

Accompanying it comes a roar.

Jesse James has fired.
 The object of his regard is Cortina, but he has not
 ned to kill.
 With a broken leg the Mexican guerrilla goes down,
 rsing and howling.
 His cries are drowned.
 Other flashes of fire, and thunderous reports, have fol-
 wed the first one.
 Bullets cut a bloody swath through the huddled
 etches.
 They see no foes. How can they fight spectre hands
 at wield such deadly arms?
 Shrieks ring out.
 It is Bedlam let loose.
 The pitiless rattle of musketry continues, for the
 mericans have grimly decided that not enough of this
 t-throat gang shall be left to give them any further
 ouble.
 As for Walter Dodd, he has fired one shot, but no more.
 seems too much like murder to mow down these
 etches, who are not competent to send back a return
 ow.
 True, they deserve their fate—there can be no mistake
 out that—but he cannot find it in his heart to continue
 e butchery.
 His companions have no such scruples.
 So long as a Mexican remains in sight, they keep up
 e deadly fusillade.
 The brigands have been panic-stricken from the very
 art, and think of escape.
 Some reach the trees.
 They are indeed lucky.
 Others find themselves confronted by half-naked men,
 ho drop apparently from the very clouds before them.
 These demons are armed with revolvers, and the spite-
 d crack rings out more than one wretched Mexican's
 om.
 It may have been war at first, but it has now degen-
 ated into slaughter.
 Jesse James is one of the first to leap into the bloody
 ade.
 He has his eye upon a struggling form.
 It is Cortina.
 The doomed miscreant and red-handed robber, who has
 ng been the terror of the border, finding his leg broken
 y the rifle ball, is endeavoring to crawl to the bushes,
 opping to secrete himself there until his men can save
 im.
 Hope has even found a lodging in his heart, when he
 ears some one leaping toward him.
 Turning his head he utters a cry of horror to see bear-
 g down upon him a giant form—in his eyes the man ap-
 ears supernaturally large—half-clad, and bearing a re-
 volver in one hand, a knife in the other.
 He recognizes Jesse James.
 The oil-soaked bundle of rags still burns fiercely, and
 ey do not suffer from lack of light.
 Despair seizes upon the wretch.
 He feels the icy hand of death already clutching his
 arbbing heart.

One last effort he makes.
 He is armed, and, half-turning, he endeavors to take
 aim at the flying avenger.
 The weapon cracks.
 At the same instant Jesse James hurls himself upon the
 wounded bandit; the revolver is sent flying from his
 hand, and Cortina lies groveling under his foe's weight.
 Eye looks into eye; one with fury, the other with
 quaking terror.
 Jesse James' hour has come.
 His knee presses upon the breast of the man who has
 been using his name—already blotted enough in the eyes
 of the world, Heaven knows—with which to cover up his
 wicked deeds.
 He grins in his joy.
 "See," he almost shouts, holding up the knife which has
 already tasted Cortina's blood; "do you recognize that
 blade? It is the one you left in the heart of poor Jack
 Dutton, with your mark on the handle. I made a vow
 to take your life with it, and to lift your scalp first, to
 show his widow that Jesse James kept his oath."
 The wretch shrieks aloud.
 Who can hear him?
 Those who have followed him on many a bloody fray
 are either flying up the hillside or else lie in the glade,
 silent forever.
 They can no longer obey his voice; his wild cries for
 help will not help, will not move their hearts.
 Jesse James bends down.
 In another moment he has the scalp of the Border Tiger
 in his possession.
 Not until then does he end the wretch's misery by a
 blow through the heart.
 No sooner has Walter Dodd seen that the victory has
 been won, than he hastily resumes his garments that have
 answered the purpose of deception to which they have
 been put, and then makes down the valley.
 His thoughts are with Molly.
 If anything has happened to her he will never forgive
 himself for having left her.
 In his hand he carries a revolver.
 The one fear he has is that some one of the fleeing Mex-
 icans may go that way, discover the horses, and either
 shoot the girl or attempt to carry her off.
 As he advances, his mind is wrought up to a high pitch
 with anxiety.
 He hears the spot.
 All the light he has to guide him comes from the stars,
 but as he carefully notes the position of the lower camp
 he makes no mistake.
 Suddenly his heart grows cold, and a dreadful chill
 passes over him.
 A muffled scream reaches his ears.
 It seems that Molly is in danger.
 Now he springs madly forward; his blood is on fire; it
 is as though boiling lava from Vesuvius ran through his
 veins.
 He reaches the spot.
 A sight greets his eyes that arouses a demon within his
 heart; a man, undoubtedly one of the escaped members of
 Cortina's band, has seized Molly unawares, and is now
 engaged in dragging her toward the horses, which can
 be seen close by.

The fiend is reckless of consequences, and simply obeys some devilish spirit in his blood.

Walter cannot fire without danger of hitting the being he loves so well.

He runs forward, determined to throw himself upon this man and give him no mercy.

In this he is too late.

Even as he starts he hears a thud, and catches a muffled shriek from the lips of the man, who is seen struggling on the ground.

No human antagonist does he wrestle with.

A body has passed through space, leaping from a tree overhead; it is a fierce jaguar, and already the brute is tearing at the throat of its intended victim.

The shrieks and struggles of the doomed Mexican grow fainter—still the forest monster tears at the flesh, and growls savagely.

Walter Dodd advances.

Molly, too weak to move after her recent terrible experience, has leaned against a tree.

She is within six feet of the growling monster, and yet unable to fly.

All at once the jaguar ceases his snarling.

He crouches low.

Even in the starlight it can be seen that his yellow eyes are fastened upon the girl, as if in her he has discovered a new victim.

A second's delay, and all is lost.

The jaguar has apparently deserted his first victim, as though the one upon whom his blazing orbs now rest is more to his liking.

As he crouches over the dead and mangled form of the Mexican, his tail moves to and fro with the regular motion of a pendulum.

You have seen a cat act in precisely the same way when watching a bird that is within reach.

Thank Heaven, Walter Dodd is armed, and that he knows how to use a revolver.

A tyro would have been so horrified at the sight that he could not move a hand.

Not so the Texan.

It is his bride who is in danger—his wife!

His arm flies out.

The revolver is discharged.

A jaguar is a tough animal to kill under the most favorable circumstances, and Walter has had a fight at close quarters with such a brute before now, after a square shot in the daytime, and with a trusty rifle.

What chance has he, then, to accomplish such a result in the darkness, with a revolver?

It would seem very minute.

One thing favors him.

If his first shot fails, there are others in the trusty weapon he holds.

What he expects occurs.

The jaguar, thus finding himself assaulted and wounded by a new enemy, turns upon Walter, and makes a leap.

This the young Texan avoids by dropping to the earth, and the lithe form passes over; then he turns upon the animal with lightning rapidity, and sends a second and a third shot into his body in double-quick order.

It is done!

A kind fortune directs one of these balls, so that it

enters a vital place; the brute struggles with the agonies of death.

They are saved!

Another moment, and Molly finds herself in the arms that are to protect her through life.

Walter leaves her no more that night, but makes a camp-fire near which they can sit and talk of the perils of the past and the bright future that lies before them.

All dangers now seem over.

Another day, and they will be upon American soil. Twenty-four hours later, if good fortune attends them, Molly will be installed as mistress in that little home Walter has built up for her—not knowing, though, when he worked, for whom it was intended.

Morning comes.

They have the supplies with them, and Molly cooks the breakfast for all.

By the time it is ready, Jesse James and his followers have arrived, leading the pack of horses laden with the silver bags, which have been fished out of the hole where they were hidden the night before.

After breakfast the little cavalcade takes up its march for the ford over the Rio Grande.

At noon they halt at the river.

Jesse James calls Walter's attention to the sky back of them. The Texan shudders when he sees it fairly black with vultures and buzzards sailing round and round over the scene of their last night's camp.

He knows its meaning.

The scavengers of the air scented their feast from afar, and are ready to do battle with the wolves and coyotes for their share.

They made the ford, and cross in safety.

Once again Texan soil is under their feet.

Jesse and Frank James swear it is the last time either of them will venture into the Mexican domain, for their late deeds will arouse the whole country against them.

That night is their last together.

In the morning they separate; the James boys go to their ranch, which they think of soon selling out, as they long to see their old home in Missouri again; Walter and his wife seek their little stock farm, and the other men go their ways.

By the light of the camp-fire that night, the five desperadoes divide the spoils.

Walter Dodd is pressed to receive a share, but he sturdily refuses; he never yet took a dollar that was won by blood, and does not mean to now.

In the morning each group passes on.

Walter Dodd never sees the others again, for the James boys find an Englishman at their ranch who wants to buy. A bargain is closed, and in less than a week the bravos are on their way up into Missouri again, where their advent is hailed with joy by the lawless part of the community, and alarm by corporations possessing plethoric purses.

Walter Dodd and Molly are happy in their home, and their ranch now extends over miles of territory, while their cattle number thousands.

THE END.

Next week's JESSE JAMES STORIES (No. 6) will contain "Jesse James in Wyoming; or, The Den in the Black Hills."

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